

No. 2

ZANE GREY'S *WESTERN*

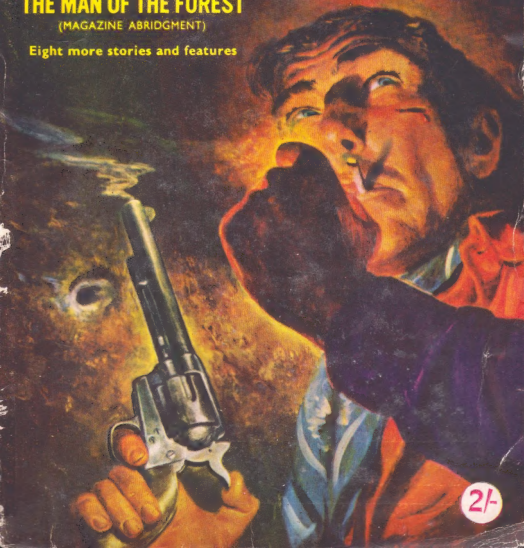
MAGAZINE

A Zane Grey Novel

THE MAN OF THE FOREST

(MAGAZINE ABRIDGMENT)

Eight more stories and features



2/-



Helen tried desperately to cover herself as Beasley yelled his challenge at Dale.



ZANE GREY'S WESTERN MAGAZINE

VOL. I, No. 2

NOVEL (magazine abridgment)

THE MAN OF THE FOREST

Zane Grey 3

NOVELETTE

THIRTEEN RATTLES AND A BUTTON

B. M. Bower 139

SHORT STORIES

SOLITUDE BASIN

John E. Kelly 109

SLICKER THAN WATER

Mark Lish 129

FACT FEATURES

JUSTICE BY THE OUNCE

Dan Duane 121

OLD JINGLEBOB AND THE LEGAL RUSTLE

W. H. Hutchinson 134

PICTORIAL FEATURE

JACK OF ALL TRADES

Dan Muller

Inside back cover

DEPARTMENTS

LONE STAR LINGO—*A Western Quiz*

128

FREE-FOR-ALL—*The Editors Speak*

159

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This Month's Magazine Abridgment

OLD AL AUCHINCLOSS, leading citizen of Pine, is slowly losing his grip on life. It is whispered among his neighbors that, once he is gone, his holdings will be confiscated, without benefit of law, by his former protegee, a man named Beasley, whose ambitions are as unlimited as his scruples are few. However, old Al, who is aware of the approach of trail's end for himself, has sent East for his beautiful niece, Helen Rayner, a favorite of his since her childhood days, intending to turn his vast interests over to her.

By pure chance, woodsman Milt Dale, lying in the loft of an abandoned cabin, overhears enough of a plot that spells danger for Helen Rayner to spur him into making one of his infrequent visits to town. Reluctant to give up his self-imposed forest exile, which for him is an unending communion with nature, he feels that he can discharge his responsibility simply by warning Al Auchincloss of the plot threatening his niece's safety. But the old man, recalling a fancied grudge against Dale, refuses to listen to him, and Milt Dale, man of the forest, is thereby plunged headlong into a thrilling sequence of adventure and peril.

With the help of some trusted friends, he saves Helen and her lovely sister, "Bo," from falling into the hands of men in the pay of Auchincloss's enemy, and takes the two girls to his forest hideaway to give them temporary refuge. There Helen Rayner and her sister have their eyes opened to the grandeur of the West and the character of its men, and, there while they wait for the girls' uncle to come for them, Dale falls in love with Helen. But, believing it impossible for her to return the affections of an uncultured man, he bids her good-by without having divulged his feelings to her.

A long winter passes, and with the advent of Spring Beasley puts his ruthless plan into motion. Milt Dale abandons his sylvan solitude to come to Helen Rayner's side—and the rest is action as only Zane Grey could write it!





The Man of the Forest

By ZANE GREY

CHAPTER ONE

The Plot

AT SUNSET hour the forest was still, lonely, sweet with tang of fir and spruce, blazing in gold and red and green; and the man who glided on under the great trees seemed to blend with the colors and, disappearing, to have become a part of the wild woodland.

Old Baldy, highest of the White

Mountains, stood up round and bare, rimmed bright gold in the last glow of the setting sun. Then, as the fire dropped behind the domed peak, a change, a cold and darkening blight, passed down the black spear-pointed slopes over all that mountain world.

It was a wild, richly timbered, and abundantly watered region of dark forests and grassy parks, 10,000 feet above sea level, isolated on all sides by the southern Arizona desert—the

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virgin home of elk and deer, of bear and lion, of wolf and fox, and the birth-place as well as the hiding-place of the fierce apache.

September in that latitude was marked by the sudden cool night breeze following shortly after sundown. Twilight appeared to come on its wings, as did faint sounds, not distinguishable before in the stillness.

Milt Dale, man of the forest, halted at the edge of a timbered ridge, to listen and to watch. Beneath him lay a narrow valley, open and grassy, from which rose a faint murmur of running water. Its music was pierced by the wild staccato yelp of a hunting coyote. From overhead in the giant fir came a twittering and rustling of grouse settling for the night; from across the valley drifted the last low calls of wild turkeys going to roost.

With night at hand and a rain-storm brewing, he did not head for his own camp, some miles distant, but directed his steps toward an old log cabin. When he reached it darkness had almost set in. He approached with caution. This cabin, like the few others scattered in the valleys, might harbor Indians or a bear or a panther. Nothing, however, appeared to be there. Then Dale studied the clouds driving across the sky, and he felt the cool dampness of a fine, misty rain on his face. It would rain off and on during the night. Whereupon he entered the cabin.

And the next moment he heard quick hoofbeats of trotting horses. Peering out, he saw dim, moving forms in the darkness, quite close at hand. They had approached against the wind so that sound had been deadened. Five horses with riders, Dale made out—saw them loom close. Then he heard rough voices.

Quickly he turned to feel in the dark for a ladder he knew led to a loft, and finding it, he quickly mounted, taking care not to make a noise with his rifle, and lay down upon the floor of brush and poles. Scarcely had he done so when heavy steps, with accompaniment of clinking spurs, passed through the door below into the cabin.

"Wal, Beasley, are you here?" queried a loud voice.

There was no reply. The man below growled under his breath, and again the spurs jingled.

"Fellers, Beasley ain't here yet," he called. "Put the hosses under the shed. We'll wait."

"Wait, huh!" came a harsh reply. "Mebbe all night—an' we got nuthin' to eat."

"Shut up, Moze. Reckon you're no good for anything' but eatin'. Put them hosses away an' some of you rustle firewood in here."

Low, muttered curses, then mingled with dull thuds of hoofs and strain of leather and heaves of tired horses.

Another shuffling, clinking footstep entered the cabin.

"Snake, it'd been sense to fetch a pack along," drawled this newcomer.

"Reckon so, Jim. But we didn't, an' what's the use hollering'? Beasley won't keep us waitin' long."

Dale, lying still and prone, felt a slow start in all his blood—a thrilling wave. That deep-voiced man below was Snake Anson, the most dangerous character of the region; and the others, undoubtedly, composed his gang, long notorious in that sparsely settled country. And the Beasley mentioned—he was one of the two biggest ranchers and sheep raisers of the White Mountain ranges. What was the meaning of a rendezvous between

Snake Anson and Beasley? Milt Dale answered that question to Beasley's discredit; and many strange matters pertaining to sheep and herders, always a mystery to the little village of Pine, now became as clear as daylight.

Other men entered the cabin.

"It ain't a-goin' to rain much," said one. Then came a crash of wood thrown to the ground.

"Jim, hyar's a chunk of pine log, dry as punk," said another.

Rustlings and slow footsteps, and then heavy thuds attested to the probability that Jim was knocking the end of a log upon the ground to split off a corner whereby a handful of dry splinters could be procured.

"Snake, lemme your pipe, an' I'll hev a fire in a jiffy."

"Wal, I want my terbacco an' I ain't carin' about no fire," replied Snake.

"Reckon you're the meanest cuss in these woods," drawled Jim.

Sharp click of steel on flint—many times—and then a sound of hard blowing and sputtering told of Jim's efforts to start a fire. Presently the pitchy blackness of the cabin changed; there came a little crackling of wood and the rustle of flame, and then a steady growing roar.

As it chanced, Dale lay face down upon the floor of the lot, and right near his eyes there were cracks between the boughs. When the fire blazed up he was fairly well able to see the men below. The only one he had ever seen was Jim Wilson, who had been well known at Pine before Snake Anson had ever been heard of. Jim was the best of a bad lot, and he had friends among honest people.

"Fire feels good," said the burly

Moze, who appeared as broad as he was black-visaged. "Fall's sure a-comin'. Now if we only had some grub!"

"Moze, there's a hunk of deer meat in my saddlebag, an' if you git it you can have half," spoke up another voice.

Moze shuffled out with alacrity.

In the firelight Snake Anson's face looked lean and serpentlike, his eyes glittered, and his long neck and all of his long length carried out the analogy of his name.

"Snake, what's this here deal with Beasley?" inquired Jim.

"Reckon you'll l'arn when I do," replied the leader. He appeared tired and thoughtful.

"Ain't we done away with enough of them poor greaser herders—for nothin'?" queried the youngest of the gang, a boy in years, whose hard, bitter lips and hungry eyes somehow set him apart from his comrades.

"You're dead right, Burt—an' that's my stand," replied the man who had sent Moze out.

"Snake, snow'll be flyin' round these woods before long," said Jim Wilson. "Are we goin to winter down in the Tonto Basin or over on the Gila?"

"Reckon we'll do some tall ridin' before we strike south," replied Snake gruffly.

At this juncture Moze returned. "Boss, I heerd a hoss comin' up the trail," he said.

SNAKE rose and stood at the door, listening. Outside the wind moaned fitfully and scattering raindrops pattered upon the cabin.

"A-huh!" exclaimed Snake in relief.

Silence ensued then for a moment, at the end of which interval Dale heard a rapid clip-clop on the rocky

trail outside. The men below shuffled uneasily, but none of them spoke. The fire cracked cheerily. Snake Anson stepped back from before the door with an action that expressed both doubt and caution. The trotting horse had halted out there somewhere.

"Ho there, inside!" called a voice from the darkness.

"Ho yourself!" replied Anson.

"That you, Snake?" quickly followed the query.

"Reckon so," returned Anson, showing himself.

The newcomer entered. He was a large man, wearing a slicker that shone wet in the firelight. His sombrero, pulled well down, shadowed his face, so that the upper half of his features might as well have been masked. He had a black, drooping mustache, and a chin like a rock. A potential force, matured and powerful, seemed to be wrapped in his movements.

"Hullo, Snake! Hullo, Wilson!" he said. "I've backed out on the other deal. Sent for you on—on another little matter—particular private."

"A-huh!" ejaculated Anson dubiously. Then he turned abruptly. "Moze, you an' Shady an' Burt go wait outside. Reckon this ain't the deal I expected. An' you can saddle the hosses."

The three members of the gang filed out, all glancing keenly at the stranger, who had moved back into the shadow.

"All right now, Beasley," said Anson, low-voiced. "What's your game? Jim, here, is in on my deals."

Then Beasley came forward to the fire, stretching his hands to the blaze. "Nothin' to do with sheep," replied he.

"Wal, I reckoned not," assented the other. "An' say—whatever your game

is, I ain't likin' the way you kept me waitin' an' ridin' around. We waited near all day at Big Spring. Then the greaser rode up an' sent us here. We're a long way from camp with no grub an' no blankets."

"I won't keep you long," said Beasley. "But even if I did you'd not mind—when I tell you this deal concerns Al Auchincloss—the man who made an outlaw of you!"

Anson's sudden action then seemed a leap of his whole frame. Wilson, likewise, bent forward eagerly. Beasley glanced at the door—then began to whisper.

"Old Auchincloss is on his last legs. He's goin' to croak. He's sent back to Missouri for a niece—a young girl—an' he means to leave his ranches an' sheep—all his stock to her. Seems he has no one else. Them ranches—an' all them sheep an' hosses! You know me an' Al were pardners in sheep-raisin' for years. He swore I cheated him an' he threw me out. An' all these years I've been swearin' he did me dirt—owed me sheep an' money. I've got as many friends in Pine—an' all the way down the trail—as Auchincloss has. An' Snake, see here—"

He paused to draw a deep breath and his big hands trembled over the blaze.

"See here," panted Beasley. "The girl's due to arrive at Magdalena on the sixteenth. That's a week from tomorrow. She'll take the stage to Snowdrop, where some of Auchincloss's men will meet her with a team."

"A-huh!" grunted Anson as Beasley halted again. "An' what of all thet?"

"She mustn't never get as far as Snowdrop!"

"You want me to hold up the stage—an' get the girl?"

"Exactly."

"Wal—an' what then?"

"Make off with her. She disappears. That's your affair. I'll press my claims on Auchincloss—hound him—an' be ready when he croaks to take over his property. Then the girl can come back, for all I care. You an' Wilson fix up the deal between you. If you have to let the gang in on it, don't give them any hunch as to who an' what. This'll make you a rich stake. An' providin', when it's paid, you strike for new territory."

"Thet might be wise," muttered Snake Anson. "Beasley, the weak point in your game is the uncertainty of life. Old Al is tough. He may fool you."

"Auchincloss is a dyin' man," declared Beasley with such positiveness that it could not be doubted.

"Wal, he sure wasn't plumb hearty when I last seen him. Beasley, in case I play your game—how'm I to know that girl?"

"Her name's Helen Rayner," replied Beasley eagerly. "She's twenty years old. All of them Auchinclosses was handsome an' they say she's the handsomest."

"A-huh! Beasley, this's sure a bigger deal—an' one I ain't fancyin'. But I never doubted your word. Come on—an' talk out. What's in it for me?"

"Don't let anyone in on this. You two can hold up the stage. Why, it was never held up! But you want to mask. How about ten thousand sheep—or what they bring at Phoenix in gold?"

Jim Wilson whistled low.

"An' leave for new territory?" repeated Snake Anson under his breath. "You've said it."

"Wal, I ain't fancyin' the girl end of this deal, but you can count on me. September sixteenth at Magdalena—an'

her name's Helen—an' she's handsome?"

"Yes. My herders will begin drivin' south in about two weeks. Later, if the weather holds good, send me word by one of them an' I'll meet you."

Beasley spread his hands once more over the blaze, pulled on his gloves and pulled down his sombrero, and with an abrupt word of parting strode out into the night.

"Jim, what do you make of him?" queried Snake Anson.

"Pard, he's got us beat two ways for Sunday," replied Wilson.

"A-huh! Wal, let's get back to camp." And he led the way out.

CHAPTER TWO

Widow Cass, Matchmaker

MILT DALE quietly sat up to gaze, with thoughtful eyes, into the gloom.

He was thirty years old. As a boy of fourteen he had run off from his school and home in Iowa and, joining a wagon train of pioneers, he was one of the first to see log cabins built on the slopes of the White Mountains. But he had not taken kindly to farming or sheep-raising or monotonous home toil, and for twelve years he had lived in the forest, with only infrequent visits to Pine and Show Down and Snowdrop. This wandering forest life of his did not indicate that he did not care for the villagers, for he did care, and he was welcome everywhere, but that he loved wild life and solitude and beauty with the primitive instinctive force of a savage.

And on this night he had stumbled

upon a dark plot against the only one of all the honest white people in that region whom he could not call a friend.

"That man Beasley!" he soliloquized. "Beasley—in cahoots with Snake Anson! Well, he was right. Al Auchincloss is on his last legs. Poor old man! When I tell him he'll never believe *me*, that's sure! Maybe nobody will. All the same, Snake Anson won't get that girl."

When the gray dawn broke he was on his way, cross-country, to the village of Pine. He pursued a zigzag course over the ridges to escape the hardest climbing, but the "senacas"—those parklike meadows so named by Mexican shepherders—were as round and level as if they had been made by man in beautiful contrast to the dark-green, rough, and rugged ridges. Both open senaca and dense wooded ridge showed to his quick eye an abundance of game.

At length he got down into the pine belt, where the great, gnarled, yellow trees soared aloft, stately, and aloof from one another, and the ground was a brown, odorous, spring mat of pine needles, level as a floor. This belt of pine ended abruptly upon wide, gray rolling, open land, almost like a prairie, with foothills lifting near and far, and the red-gold blaze of aspen thickets catching the morning sun.

He crossed the wide, grassy plain and struck another gradual descent where aspens and pines crowded a shallow ravine and warm, sunlighted glades bordered along a sparkling brook. Here he heard a turkey gobble, and that was a signal for him to change his course and make a crouching, silent detour around a clump of aspens.

In a sunny patch of grass a dozen or more big gobblers stood, all suspicious-

ly facing in his direction, heads erect, with that wild aspect peculiar to their species. Old wild-turkey gobblers were the most difficult game to stalk. Dale shot two of them. The others began to run like ostriches, thudding over the ground, spreading their wings, and with that running start launched their heavy bodies into whirring flight. They flew low, at about the height of a man from the grass, and vanished in the woods.

Dale threw the two turkeys over his shoulder and went on his way. Soon he came to a break in the forest level, from which he gazed down a league-long slope of pine and cedar, out upon the bare, glistening desert, stretching away, endlessly rolling out to the dim, dark horizon line.

The little hamlet of Pine lay on the last level of sparsely timbered forest. A road, running parallel with a dark-watered, swift-flowing stream, divided the cluster of log cabins from which columns of blue smoke drifted lazily aloft. Fields of corn and fields of oats, yellow in the sunlight, surrounded the village; and green pastures, dotted with horses and cattle, reached away to the denser woodland.

This site appeared to be a natural clearing, for there was no evidence of cut timber. The scene was rather too wild to be pastoral, but it was serene, tranquil, giving the impression of a remote community, prosperous and happy, drifting along the peaceful tenor of sequestered lives.

Dale halted before a neat little log cabin and a little patch of garden bordered with sunflowers. His call was answered by an old woman, gray and bent, but remarkably spry, who appeared at the door.

"Why, land's sakes, if it ain't Milt Dale!" she exclaimed in welcome.

"Reckon it's me, Mrs. Cass," he replied. "An' I've brought you a turkey."

"Milt, you're that good boy who never forgits old Widow Cass. What a gobbler! First one I've seen this fall. My man Tom used to fetch home gobblers like that. Come right in. You air hungry, I know. Now, son, when last did you eat a fresh egg or a flapjack?"

"You should remember," he answered, laughing, as he followed her into a small, clean kitchen.

"Laws-a-me! An' thet's months ago," she replied, shaking her gray head.

"Milt, you should give up that wild life—an' marry—an' have a home."

"You always tell me that."

"Yes, an' I'll see you do it yet. Now you set there, an' pretty soon I'll give you thet to eat which'll make your mouth water."

"What's the news, Auntie?" he asked.

"Nary news in this dead place. Why, nobody's been to Snowdrop in two weeks! Sary Jones died, poor old soul—she's better off—an' one of my cows run away. Milt, she's wild when she gits loose in the woods. An' you'll have to track her, 'cause nobody else can. An' John Dakker's heifer was killed by a lion, an' Lem Harden's fast hoss—you know his favorite—was stole by hoss thieves. Lem is jest crazy. An' that reminds me, Milt, where's your big ranger, thet you'd never sell or lend?"

"My horses are up in the woods, Auntie—safe, I reckon, from horse thieves."

"Well, that's a blessin'. We've had some stock stole this summer, Milt, an' no mistake."

Thus, while preparing a meal for

Dale, the old woman went on recounting all that had happened in the little village since his last visit. Dale enjoyed her gossip and quaint philosophy, and it was exceedingly good to sit at her table. In his opinion, nowhere else could there have been such butter and cream, such ham and eggs. Besides, she always had apple pie, it seemed, at any time he happened in; and apple pie was one of Dale's few regrets while up in the lonely forest.

"How's old Al Auchincloss?" presently inquired Dale.

"Poorly—poorly," sighed Mrs. Cass. "But he tramps an' rides around same as ever. Al's not long for this world. An' Milt, that reminds me—there's the biggest news you ever heard."

"You don't say so!" exclaimed Dale, to encourage the excited old woman.

"Al has sent back to Saint Joe for his niece, Helen Rayner. She's to inherit all his property. We've heard much of her—a purty lass, they say. Now, Milt Dale, here's your chance. Stay out of the woods an' go to work—you can marry that girl!"

"No chance for me, Auntie," replied Dale, smiling.

The old woman snorted. "Much you know! Any girl would have you, Milt Dale, if you'd only throw a kerchief."

"Me! An' why, Auntie?"

"Why? I declare, Milt, you live so in the woods you're like a boy of ten—an' then sometimes as old as the hills. There's no young man to compare with you, hereabouts. An' this girl—she'll have all the spunk of the Auchinclosses."

"Then maybe she'd not be such a catch, after all," replied Dale.

"Wal, you've no cause to love them, that's sure. But, Milt, the Auchincloss women are always good wives."

"Dear Auntie, you're dreamin'," said Dale soberly. "I want no wife. I'm happy in the woods."

"Air you goin' to live like an Injun all your days, Milt Dale?" she queried sharply.

"I hope so."

"You ought to be ashamed. But some lass will change you, boy, an' mebbe it'll be this Helen Rayner. I hope an' pray so to thet."

"Auntie, supposin' she did change me. She'd never change old Al. He hates me, you know."

"Wal, I ain't so sure, Milt. I met Al the other day. He inquired for you, an' said you was wild, but he reckoned men like you was good for pioneer settlements. Lord knows the good turns you've done this village! Milt, old Al doesn't approve of your wild life, but he never had no hard feelin' till thet tame lion of yours killed so many of his sheep."

"Auntie, I don't believe Tom ever killed Al's sheep," declared Dale positively.

"Wal, Al thinks so, an' many other people," replied Mrs. Cass, shaking her gray head doubtfully. "You never swore he didn't. An' there was them two shepherders who did swear they seen him."

"They only saw a cougar. An' they were so scared they ran."

"Who wouldn't? Thet big beast is enough to scare anyone. For land's sakes, don't ever fetch him down here again! I'll never forgit the time you did. All the folks an' children an' hosses in Pine broke an' run thet day."

"Yes, but Tom wasn't to blame. Auntie, he's the tamest of my pets. Didn't he try to put his head on your lap an' lick your hand?"

"Wal, Milt, I ain't gainsayin' your

cougar pet didn't act better'n a lot of people I know, fer he did. But the looks of him an' what's been said was enough for me."

"An' what's all that, Auntie?"

"They say he's wild when out of your sight. An' thet he'd trail an' kill anythin' you put him after."

"I trained him to be just that way."

"Wal, leave Tom to home up in the woods—when you visit us."

Dale finished his hearty meal, and listened awhile longer to the old women's talk; then, taking his rifle and the other turkey, he bade her good-by. She followed him out.

"Now, Milt, you'll come soon again, won't you—jest to see Al's niece—who'll be here in a week?"

"I reckon I'll drop in some day. Auntie, have you seen my friends, the Mormon boys?"

"They're workin' for Beasley now."

"Is that so?" rejoined Dale with a sudden start. "An' what doin'?"

"Beasley is gettin' so rich he's buildin' a fence, an' didn't have enough help, so I hear."

"Beasley gettin' rich!" repeated Dale thoughtfully. "More sheep an' horses an' cattle than ever, I reckon?"

"Laws-a-me! Why, Milt, Beasley ain't any idea what he owns. Yes, he's the biggest man in these parts, since poor old Al's took to failin'. I reckon Al's health ain't none improved by Beasley's success. They've had some bitter quarrels lately—so I hear. Al ain't what he was."

Dale bade good-by again to his old friend and strode away, thoughtful and serious. Beasley would not only be difficult to circumvent, but he would be dangerous to oppose. There did not appear much doubt of his driving his

way rough-shod to the dominance of affairs there in Pine.

Dale, passing down the road, began to meet acquaintances who had hearty welcome for his presence and interest in his doings, so that his pondering was interrupted for the time being. He carried the turkey to another old friend, and when he left her house he went on to the village store. This was a large log cabin, roughly covered with clapboards, with a wide plank platform in front and a hitching-rail in the road. Several horses were standing there, and a group of lazy, shirt-sleeved loungers.

"I'll be doggoned if it ain't Milt Dale!" exclaimed one.

"Howdy, Milt, old buckskin! Right down glad to see you," greeted another.

"Hello, Dale! You air shore good for sore eyes," drawled still another.

After a long period of absence Dale always experienced a singular warmth of feeling when he met these acquaintances. It faded quickly when he got back to the intimacy of his woodland, and that was because the people of Pine, with few exceptions—though they liked him and greatly admired his outdoor wisdom—regarded him as a sort of nonentity.

Presently Beasley strode down the street, and when about to enter the store he espied Dale.

"Hullo there, Milt!" he called cordially, as he came forward with extended hand. His greeting was sincere, but the lightning glance he shot over Dale was not born of his pleasure. Seen in daylight, Beasley was a big, bold, bluff man, with strong, dark features. His aggressive presence suggested that he was a good friend and a bad enemy.

Dale shook hands with him. "How are you, Beasley?"

"Ain't complainin', Milt, though I got more work than I can rustle. Reckon you wouldn't take a job bossin' my shepherders?"

"Reckon I wouldn't," replied Dale. "Thanks all the same."

"Where're you headin' from?"

"'Cross-country from my camp," replied Dale, rather evasively.

"Your camp! Nobody ever found that yet," declared Beasley gruffly.

"It's up there," said Dale.

"Reckon you've got that cougar chained in your cabin door?" queried Beasley, and there was a barely distinguishable shudder of his muscular frame.

"Tom ain't chained. An' I haven't no cabin, Beasley."

"You mean to tell me that big brute stays in your camp without bein' hog-tied or corralled!" demanded Beasley.

"Sure he does."

"Beats me! But, then, I'm queer on cougars. Have had many a cougar trail me at night. Ain't sayin' I was scared. But I don't care for that brand of varmint—Milt, you goin' to stay down awhile?"

"Yes, I'll hang around some."

"Come over to the ranch. Glad to see you any time. Some old huntin' pards of yours are workin' for me."

"Thanks, Beasley. I reckon I'll come."

Beasley turned away and took a step, and then, as if with an after-thought, he wheeled again. "Suppose you've heard about old Auchincloss bein' near petered out?" he queried. A strong, ponderous cast of thought seemed to emanate from his features.

"Widow Cass was tellin' me all the news. Too bad about old Al," replied Dale.

"Sure is. He's done for. An' I'm sorry—though Al's never been square—"

"Beasley," interrupted Dale quickly, "you can't say that to me. Al Auchincloss always was the whitest an' squarest man in this sheep country."

Beasley gave Dale a fleeting, dark glance. "Dale, what you think ain't goin' to influence feelin' on this range," returned Beasley deliberately. "You live in the woods an'—"

"Reckon living' in the woods I might think—an' know a' whole lot," interposed Dale, just as deliberately.

The group of men exchanged surprised glances. This was Milt Dale in different aspect. And Beasley did not conceal a puzzled surprise.

"About what-now?" he asked bluntly.

"Why, about what's goin' on in Pine," replied Dale.

Probably the keen Beasley had never before considered Milt Dale as a responsible person, certainly never one in any way to cross his trail. But on the instant, perhaps, some instinct was born, or he divined an antagonism in Dale that was both surprising and perplexing.

"Dale, I've differences with Al Auchincloss—have had them for years," said Beasley. "Much of what he owns is mine. An' it's goin' to come to me. Now I reckon people will be takin' sides—some for me an' some for Al. Most are for me. Where do you stand? Al Auchincloss never had no use for you, an' besides he's a dyin' man. Are you goin' on his side?"

"Yes, I reckon I am."

"Wal, I'm glad you've declared yourself," rejoined Beasley shortly, and he strode away with the ponderous gait of a man who would brush any obstacle from his path.

"Milt, that's bad—making' Beasley sore at you," said Lem Harden. "He's on the way to boss this outfit."

"That was white of Milt to stick up fer poor old Al," declared Lem's brother.

Dale broke away from them and wended a thoughtful way down the road. The burden of what he knew about Beasley weighed less heavily upon him, and the close-lipped course he had decided upon appeared wisest.

CHAPTER THREE

Pine's Patriarch

IN THE afternoon, Dale, having accomplished some tasks imposed upon him by his old friends at Pine, turned slow steps in the direction of Auchincloss ranch.

The flat, square stone and log cabin of unusually large size stood upon a little hill half a mile out of the village. A home as well as a fort, it had been the first structure erected in that region, and the process of building had more than once been interrupted by Indian attacks. The Apaches had for some time, however, confined their fierce raids to points south of the White Mountain range.

Auchincloss's house looked down upon barns and sheds and corrals of all sizes and shapes, and hundreds of acres of well-cultivated soil. Fields of oats waved gray and yellow in the afternoon sun; an immense green pasture was divided by a willow-bordered brook, and here were droves of horses, and out on the rolling bare flats were straggling herds of cattle.

The whole ranch showed many years of toil and the perseverance of man. The brook irrigated the verdant valley between the ranch and the village. Water for the house, however, came down from the high, wooded slope of the mountain, and had been brought there by a simple expedient. Pine logs of uniform size had been laid end to end, with a deep trough cut in them. They made a shining line down the slope, across the valley, and up the little hill to the Auchincloss home. Near the house the hollowed halves of logs had been bound together, making a crude pipe.

Dale encountered Al Auchincloss sitting in the shade of a porch, talking to some of his sheepherders and stockmen. Auchincloss was a short man of extremely powerful build and great width of shoulder. He had no gray hairs, and he did not look old, yet there was in his face a certain weariness, something that resembled sloping lines of distress, dim and pale, that told of age and the ebb tide of vitality. His features, cast in large mold, were clean-cut and comely, and he had frank blue eyes, somewhat sad, yet still full of spirit.

Dale had no idea how his visit would be taken, and he certainly would not have been surprised to be ordered off the place. He had not set foot there for years. Therefore it was with surprise that he saw Auchincloss wave away the herders and take his entrance without any particular expression.

"Howdy, Al! How are you?" greeted Dale easily, as he leaned his rifle against the log wall.

Auchincloss did not rise, but he offered his hand.

"Wal, Milt Dale, I reckon this is the

first time I ever seen you that I couldn't lay you flat on your back," replied the rancher. His tone was both testy and full of pathos.

"I take it you mean you ain't very well," replied Dale. "I'm sorry, Al."

"No, it ain't that. Never was sick in my life. I'm just played out, like a hoss that had been strong an' willin', an' did too much. Wal, you don't look a day older, Milt. Livin' in the woods rolls over a man's head."

"Yes, I'm feelin' fine, an' time never bothers me."

"Wal, mabbe you ain't such a fool, after all. I've wondered lately—since I had time to think. But, Milt, you don't git no richer."

"Al, I have all I want an' need."

"Wal, then, you don't support anybody; you don't do any good in the world."

"We don't agree, Al," replied Dale with his slow smile.

"Reckon we never did. An' you jest come over to pay your respects to me, eh?"

"Not altogether," answered Dale ponderingly. "First off, I'd like to say I'll pay back them sheep you always claimed my tame cougar killed."

"You will! An' how'd you go about that?"

"Wasn't very many sheep, was there?"

"A matter of fifty head."

"So many! Al, do you still think old Tom killed them sheep?"

"Humph! Milt, I know damn well he did."

"Al, now how could you know somethin' I don't? Be reasonable now. Let's don't fall out about this again. I'll pay back the sheep. Work it out—"

"Milt Dale, you'll come down here an' work out that fifty head of sheep!"

ejaculated the old rancher incredulously.

"Sure."

"Wal, I'll be damned!" He sat back and gazed with shrewd eyes at Dale. "What's got into you, Milt? Hev you heard about my niece thet's comin', an' think you'll shine up to her?"

"Yes, Al, her comin' has a good deal to do with my deal," replied Dale soberly. "But I never thought to shine up to her, as you hint."

"Haw! Haw! You're just like all the other colts hereabouts. Reckon it's a good sign, too. It'll take a woman to fetch you out of the woods. But, boy, this niece of mine, Helen Rayner, will stand you on your head. I never seen her. They say she's jest like her mother. An' Nell Auchincloss—what a girl she was!"

Dale felt his face grow red. "Honest, Al—" he began.

"Son, don't lie to an old man."

"Lie! I wouldn't lie to anyone. Al, it's only men who live in towns an' are always makin' deals. I live in the forest, where there's nothin' to make me lie."

"Wal, no offense meant, I'm sure," responded Auchincloss. "An' mebbe there's somethin' in what you say. We was talkin' about them sheep your big cat killed. Wal, Milt, I can't prove it, that's sure. An' mebbe you'll think me dodderly when I tell you my reason. It wasn't what them greaser herders said about seein' a cougar in the herd."

"What was it, then?" queried Dale, much interested.

"Wal, thet day a year ago, I seen your pet. He was lyin' in front of the store an' you was inside tradin' fer supplies, I reckon. It was like meetin' an enemy face to face. Because, damn me if I didn't know that cougar was

guilty when he looked in my eyes! There!"

The old rancher expected to be laughed at. But Dale was grave.

"Al, I know how you felt," he replied, as if they were discussing an action of a human being. "Sure I'd hate to doubt old Tom. But he's a cougar. An' the ways of animals are strange. Anyway, Al, I'll make good the loss of your sheep."

"No, you won't," rejoined Auchincloss quickly. "We'll call it off. I'm takin' it square of you to make the offer. Thet's enough. So forget your worry about work, if you had any."

"There's somethin' else, Al, I wanted to say," began Dale with hesitation. "An' it's about Beasley."

"Don't mention—thet—thet greaser—to me!" burst out the rancher. "It makes me see—red. Dale, I ain't overlookin' that you spoke up fer me today—stood fer my side. Lem Harden told me. I was glad. An' thet's why—today—I forgot our old quarrel. But not a word about thet sheep thief—or I'll drive you off the place!"

"But, Al—be reasonable," remonstrated Dale. "It's necessary thet I speak of—of Beasley."

"It ain't. Not to me. I won't listen."

"Reckon you'll have to, Al," returned Dale. "Beasley's after your property. He's made a deal—"

"By heaven! I know that!" shouted Auchincloss, tottering up, with his face now black-red. "Do you think thet's news to me? Shut up, Dale! I can't stand it."

"But Al—there's worse," went on Dale hurriedly. "Worse! Your life's threatened—an' your niece, Helen—she's to be—"

"Shut up—an' clear out!" roared Auchincloss, waving his huge fists.

"But, Al—I'm your friend—" began Dale appealingly.

"Friend, hey?" returned the rancher with grim, bitter passion. "Then you're the only one. Milt Dale, I'm rich an' I'm a dyin' man. I trust nobody. But, you wild hunter—if you're my friend—prove it! Go kill that greaser sheep thief! *Do* somethin'—an' then come talk to me!"

With that he lurched, half falling into the house, and slammed the door.

Dale stood there for a blank moment, and then, taking up his rifle, he strode away.

Toward sunset Dale located the camp of his four Mormon friends, and reached it in time for supper.

John, Roy, Joe, and Hal Beeman were sons of a pioneer Mormon who had settled the little community of Snowdrop. They were young men in years, but hard labor and hard life in the open had made them look matured. Only a year's difference in age stood between John and Roy, and between Roy and Joe, and likewise Joe and Hal. When it came to appearance they were difficult to distinguish from one another. Horsemen, sheepherders, cattle raisers, hunters—they all possessed long wiry, powerful frames, lean, bronzed, still faces, and the quiet, keen eyes of men used to the open.

Their camp was situated beside a spring in a cove surrounded by aspens, some three miles from Pine; and, though working for Beasley, near the village, they had ridden to and fro from camp, after the habit of seclusion peculiar to their kind.

Dale and the brothers had much in common, and a warm regard had sprung up. But their exchange of confidences had wholly concerned things pertaining to the forest. Dale ate sup-

per with them, and talked as usual when he met them, without giving any hint of the purpose forming in his mind.

After the meal he helped Joe round up the horses, hobble them for the night, and drive them into a grassy glade among the pines. Later, when the shadows stole through the forest on the cool wind, and the campfire glowed comfortably, Dale broached the subject that possessed him.

"An' so you're working for Beasley?" he queried, by way of starting conversation.

"We was," drawled John. "But today, bein' the end of our month, we got our pay an' quit. Beasley sure was sore."

"Why'd you knock off?"

John essayed no reply, and his brothers all had that quiet, suppressed look of knowledge under restraint.

"Listen to what I come to tell you, then you'll talk," went on Dale. Hurdled he told of Beasley's plot to abduct Al Auchincloss's niece and claim the dying man's property.

When Dale ended, rather breathlessly, the Mormon boys sat without any show of surprise or feeling. John, the eldest, took up a stick and slowly poked the red embers of the fire, making the white sparks fly.

"Now, Milt, why'd you tell us that?" he asked guardedly.

"You're the only friends I've got," replied Dale. "It didn't seem safe for me to talk down in the village. I thought of you boys right off. I ain't goin' to let Snake Anson get that girl. An' I need help, so I come to you."

"Beasley's strong around Pine, an' old Al's weakenin'. Beasley will git the property, girl or no girl," said John.

"Things don't always turn out as they look. But no matter about that. The girl deal is what riled me. She's to arrive at Magdalena on the sixteenth, an' take stage for Snowdrop. Now what to do? If she travels on that stage I'll be on it, you bet. But she oughtn't to be in it at all. Boys, somehow I'm goin' to save her. Will you help me? I reckon I've been in some tight corners for you. Sure, this's different. But are you my friends? You know now what Beasley is. An' you're all lost at the hands of Snake Anson's gang. You've got fast hosses, eyes for trackin', an' you can handle a rifle. You're the kind of fellows I'd want in a tight pinch with a bad gang. Will you stand by me or see me go alone?"

Then John Beeman, silently and with pale face, gave Dale's hand a powerful grip, and one by one the other brothers rose to do likewise. Their eyes flashed and a strange bitterness hovered around their thin lips.

"Milt, mebbe we know what Beasley is better'n you," said John at length. "He ruined my father. He's cheated other Mormons. We boys have proved to ourselves that he gets the sheep Anson's gang steals, an' drives the herds to Phoenix! Our people won't let us accuse Beasley. So we've suffered in silence. My father always said, let someone else say the first word against Beasley, an' you've come to us!"

Roy Beeman put a hand on Dale's shoulder. He, perhaps, was the keenest of the brothers and the one to whom adventure and peril called most. He had been oftenest with Dale, on many a long trail, and he was the hardest rider and the most relentless tracker in all that range country.

"An' we're goin' with you," he said in a strong and rolling voice.

CHAPTER FOUR

Welcome to the West

HELEN RAYNER had been on the west-bound overland train fully twenty-four hours before she made an alarming discovery.

Accompanied by her sister Bo, a precocious girl of sixteen, Helen had left St. Joseph with a heart saddened by farewells to loved ones at home, yet full of thrilling and vivid anticipations of the strange life in the Far West. All her people had the pioneer spirit; love of change, action, adventure, was in her blood. Then duty to a widowed mother with a large and growing family had called to Helen to accept this rich uncle's offer. She had taught school and also her little brothers and sisters; she had helped along in other ways. And now, though the tearing up of the roots of old loved ties was hard, this opportunity was irresistible in its call. The prayer of her dreams had been answered.

To bring good fortune to her family; to take care of this beautiful, wild little sister; to leave the yellow, sordid, humdrum towns for the great, rolling, boundless open; to live on a wonderful ranch that was some day to be her own; to have fulfilled a deep, instinctive, and undeveloped love of horses, cattle, sheep, of desert and mountain, of trees and brooks and wild flowers—all this was the sum of her most passionate longings, now in some marvelous, fairylike way to come true.

A check to her happy anticipations, a blank, sickening dash of cold water upon her warm and intimate dreams, had been the discovery that Harve

Riggs was on the train. His presence could mean only one thing—that he had followed her. Riggs had been the worst of many sore trials back there in St. Joseph. He had possessed some claim or influence upon her mother, who favored his offer of marriage to Helen; he was neither attractive, nor good, nor industrious, nor anything that interested her; he was the boastful, strutting adventurer, not genuinely Western, and he affected long hair and guns and notoriety.

Helen had suspected the veracity of the many fights he claimed had been his, and also she suspected that he was not really big enough to be bad—as Western men were bad. But on the train, in the station at La Junta, one glimpse of him, manifestly spying upon her while trying to keep out of her sight, warned Helen that she now might have a problem on her hands.

When she left St. Joseph she had faced the West with a beating heart and a high resolve to be worthy of that West. Homes had to be made out there in that far country, so Uncle Al had written, and women were needed to make homes. She meant to be one of these women and to make of her sister another. And with the thought that she would know definitely what to say to Riggs when he approached her, sooner or later, Helen dismissed him from mind.



Early the next morning, while the girls were delving into their apparently bottomless basket of food, the train stopped at Las Vegas.

"Look! Look!" cried Bo in thrilling voice. "Cowboys! Oh, Nell, look!"

Helen, laughing, looked first at her sister, and thought how most of all she was good to look at. Bo was little, instinct with pulsating life, and she had chestnut hair and dark-blue eyes. These eyes were flashing, roguish, and they drew like magnets.

Outside on the rude station platform were railroad men, Mexicans, and a group of lounging cowboys. Long, lean, bowlegged fellows they were, with young, frank faces and intent eyes. One of them seemed particularly attractive with his superb build, his red-bronze face and bright-red scarf, his swinging gun, and the huge, long, curved spurs.

Evidently he caught Bo's admiring gaze, for, with a word to his companions, he sauntered toward the window where the girls sat. His gait was singular, almost awkward, as if he was not accustomed to walking. The long spurs jingled musically. He removed his sombrero and stood at ease, frank, cool, smiling. Helen liked him on sight, and, looking to see what effect he had upon Bo, she found that young lady staring, frightened stiff.

"Good maw'nin'," drawled the cowboy, with slow, good-humored smile. "Now where might you-all be trav-elin'?"

The sound of his voice, the clean-cut and droll geniality, seemed new and delightful to Helen.

"We go to Magdalena—then take stage for the White Mountains," replied Helen.

The cowboy's still, intent eyes showed surprise.

"Apache country, Miss," he said. "I for I'm sorry. Ther's shore no place for you-all. Beggin' your pawdin—you ain't Mormons?"

"No. We're nieces of Al Auchincloss," rejoined Helen.

"Wal, you don't say! I've been down Magdalena way an' heerd of Al. Reckon you're goin' a visitin'?"

"It's to be home for us."

"Shore that's fine. The West needs girls—Yes, I've heerd of Al. An old Arizona cattleman in a sheep country! That's bad. Now I'm wonderin'—if I'd drift down there an' ask him for a job ridin' for him—would I get it?"

His lazy smile was infectious and his meaning was as clear as crystal water.

"My uncle once said in a letter that he never had enough men to run his ranch," replied Helen, smiling.

"Shore I'll go. I reckon I'd jest naturally drift that way—now."

He seemed so laconic, so easy, so nice, that he could not have been taken seriously, yet Helen's quick perceptions registered a daring, a something that was both sudden and inevitable in him. His last word was as clear as the soft look he fixed upon Bo.

"Maybe my little sister will put in a good word for you—to Uncle Al," said Helen.

Just then the train jerked and started slowly. The cowboy took two long strides beside the car, his heated, boyish face almost on a level with the window, his eyes, now shy and a little wistful, yet bold, too, fixed upon Bo.

"Good-by—sweetheart!" he called. He halted—was lost to view.

"Well!" ejaculated Helen contritely, half sorry, half amused. "What a sudden young gentleman!"

Bo had blushed beautifully. "Nell, wasn't he glorious!" she burst out with eyes shining.

It appeared plain that Bo resisted a frantic desire to look out of the window and to wave her hand. But she

only peeped out, manifestly to her disappointment.

"Do you think he—he'll come to Uncle Al's?" asked Bo.

"Child, he was only in fun."

"Nell, I'll bet you he comes. Oh, it'd be great! I'm going to love cowboys. They don't look like that Harve Riggs who ran after you so."

One of the trainmen directed the girls' attention to a green, sloping mountain rising to a bold, blunt bluff of bare rock; calling it Starvation Peak, he told a story of how Indians had once driven Spaniards up there and starved them.

Bo was intensely interested, and thereafter she watched more keenly than ever, and always had a question for a passing trainman. The adobe houses of the Mexicans pleased her, and when the train got out into Indian country, where pueblos appeared near the track and Indians with their bright colors and shaggy wild mustangs—then she was enraptured.

"But these Indians are peacefull!" she exclaimed once, regretfully.

"Gracious, child! You don't want to see hostile Indians, do you?" queried Helen.

"I do, you bet," was the frank rejoinder.

"Well, I'll bet that I'll be sorry I didn't leave you with Mother."

"Nell—you never will!"

They reached Albuquerque about noon, and this important station, where they had to change trains, had been the first dreaded anticipation of the journey. It certainly was a busy place—full of jabbering Mexicans, stalking, red-faced, wicked-looking cowboys, lolling Indians. In the confusion Helen would have been hard put to it to preserve calmness, with Bo to

watch, and all that baggage to carry, and the other train to find; but the kindly brakeman who had been attentive to them now helped them off the train into the other—a service for which Helen was very grateful.

"Albuquerque's a hard place," confided the trainman. "Better stay in the car—and don't hang out the windows. Good luck to you!"

Only a few passengers were in the car and they were Mexicans at the forward end. This branch train consisted of one passenger coach, with a baggage car, attached to a string of freight cars. Helen told herself, somewhat grimly, that soon she would know surely whether or not her suspicions of Harve Riggs had warrant. If he was going on to Magdalena on that day he must go in this coach. Presently Bo, who was not obeying admonitions, drew her head out of the window. Her eyes were wide in amazement, her mouth open.

"Nell! I saw that man Riggs!" she whispered. "He's going to get on this train."

"Bo, I saw him yesterday," replied Helen soberly.

"He's followed you—the—the—"

"Now, Bo, don't get excited," remonstrated Helen. "We've left home now. We've got to take things as they come. Never mind if Riggs has followed me. I'll settle him."

"Oh! Then you won't speak—have anything to do with him?"

"I won't if I can help it."

Other passengers boarded the train, dusty, uncouth, rugged men, and some hard-featured, poorly clad women, marked by toil, and several more Mexicans. With bustle and loud talk they found their several seats.

Then Helen saw Harve Riggs enter,

burdened with much luggage. He was a man of about medium height, of dark, flashy appearance, cultivating long black mustache and hair. His apparel was striking, as it consisted of black frock coat, black trousers stuffed in high, fancy-topped boots, an embroidered vest, a flowing tie, and a black sombrero. His belt and gun were prominent. It was significant that he excited comment among the other passengers.

When he had deposited his pieces of baggage he seemed to square himself, and, turning abruptly, approached the seat occupied by the girls. When he reached it he sat down upon the arm of the one opposite, took off his sombrero, and deliberately looked at Helen. His eyes were light, glinting, with hard, restless quiver, and his mouth was coarse and arrogant. Helen had never seen him detached from her home surroundings, and now the difference struck cold upon her heart.

"Hello, Nell!" he said. "Surprised to see me?"

"No," she replied coldly.

"I'll gamble you are."

"Harve Riggs, I told you the day before I left home that nothing you could do or say mattered to me."

"Reckon that ain't so, Nell. Any woman I keep track of has reason to think. An' you know it."

"Then you followed me—out here?" demanded Helen, and her voice, despite her control, quivered with anger.

"I sure did," he replied, and there was as much thought of himself in the act as there was of her.

"Why? Why? It's useless—hopeless."

"I swore I'd have you, or nobody else would," he replied, and in the passion of his voice there sounded egotism rather than hunger for a woman's love.

"But I reckon I'd have struck West anyhow, sooner or later."

"You're not going to—all the way—to Pine?" faltered Helen, momentarily weakening.

"Nell, I'll camp on your trail from now on," he declared.

Then Bo sat bolt-upright, with pale face and flashing eyes.

"Harve Riggs, you leave Nell alone," she burst out in ringing, brave young voice. "I'll tell you what—I'll bet—if you follow her and nag her any more, my uncle Al or some cowboy will run you out of the country."

"Hello, Pepper!" replied Riggs coolly. "I see your manners haven't improved an' you're still wild about cowboys."

"People don't have good manners with—with—"

"Bo, hush!" admonished Helen.

Whereupon Bo turned her back to Riggs and looked out of the window. The man laughed. Then he stood up and leaned over Helen.

"Nell, I'm goin' wherever you go," he said steadily. "You can take that friendly or not, just as it pleases you. But if you've got any sense you'll not give these people out here a hunch against me. I might hurt somebody. An' wouldn't it be better to act friends? For I'm goin' to look after you, whether you like it or not."

Helen had considered this man an annoyance, and later a menace, and now she must declare open enmity with him. However disgusting the idea that he considered himself a factor in her new life, it was the truth. He existed, he had control over his movements. She could not change that. She hated the need of thinking so much about him, and suddenly, with a hot, bursting anger, she hated the man.

"You'll not look after me. I'll take care of myself," she said, and she turned her back upon him. She heard him mutter under his breath and slowly move down the car. Then Bo slipped a hand in hers.

"Never mind, Nell," she whispered. "You know what old Sheriff Haines said about Harve Riggs. 'A four-flush would-be gun fighter! If he ever strikes a real Western town he'll get run out of it.' I just wish my red-faced cowboy had got on this train!"

Helen felt a rush of gladness that she had yielded to Bo's wild importunities to take her West. The spirit which had made Bo incorrigible at home probably would make her react happily to life out in this free country. Yet Helen, with all her warmth and gratefulness, had to laugh at her sister.

"Your red-faced cowboy! Why, Bo, you were scared stiff. And now you claim him!"

"I certainly could love that fellow," replied Bo dreamily.

"Child, you've been saying that about fellows for a long time. And you've never looked twice at any of them yet."

"He was different—Nell, I'll bet he comes to Pine."

"I hope he does. I wish he was on this train. I liked his looks, Bo."

"Well, Nell dear, he looked at *me* first and last—so don't get your hopes up. Oh, the train's starting! Good-by, Albu-ker—what's that awful name? Nell, let's eat dinner. I'm starved."

Time passed, while Helen watched and learned and dreamed. The train stopped, at long intervals, at wayside stations where there seemed nothing but adobe sheds and Mexicans, and dust and heat. Bo awoke and began to

chatter, and to dig into the basket. She learned from the conductor that Magdalena was only two stations on. And she was full of conjectures as to who would meet them, what would happen. So Helen was drawn back to sober realities, in which there was considerable zest. Assuredly she did not know what was going to happen.

Twice Riggs passed up and down the aisle, his dark face and light eyes and sardonic smile deliberately forced upon her sight. But again Helen fought a growing dread with contemptuous scorn. This fellow was not half a man. It was not conceivable what he could do, except annoy her, until she arrived at Pine. Her uncle was to meet her or send for her at Snowdrop, which place, Helen knew, was distant a good long ride by stage from Magdalena. This stage ride was the climax and the dread of all the long journey, in Helen's considerations.

"Oh, Nell!" cried Bo with delight. "We're nearly there! Next station, the conductor said."

"I wonder if the stage travels at night," said Helen thoughtfully.

"Sure it does!" replied the irrepressible Bo.

The train, though it clattered along as usual, seemed to Helen to fly. There the sun was setting over bleak New Mexican bluffs, Magdalena was at hand, and night, and adventure. Helen's heart beat fast. She watched the yellow plains where the cattle grazed; their presence and irrigation ditches and cottonwood trees told her that the railroad part of the journey was nearly ended.

Then, at Bo's little scream, she looked across the car and out of the window to see a line of low, flat, red-adobe houses. The train began to slow down.

Helen saw children run, white children and Mexican together; then more houses, and high upon a hill an immense adobe church, crude and glaring, yet somehow beautiful.

Helen told Bo to put on her bonnet, and, performing a like office for herself, she was ashamed of the trembling of her fingers. There were bustle and talk in the car.

The train stopped. Helen peered out to see a straggling crowd of Mexicans and Indians, all motionless and stolid, as if trains or nothing else mattered. Next Helen saw a white man, and that was a relief. He stood out in front of the others. Tall and broad, somehow striking, he drew a second glance that showed him to be a hunter clad in gray-fringed buckskin and carrying a rifle.

CHAPTER FIVE

Strange Protector

THERE was no kindly brakemen here to help the sisters with their luggage. Helen bade Bo take her share; thus burdened, they made an awkward and laborious shift to get off the train.

Upon the platform of the car a strong hand seized Helen's heavy bag, with which she was straining, and a loud voice called out:

"Girls, we're here—sure out in the wild an' woolly West!"

The speaker was Riggs, and he had possessed himself of part of her baggage with action and speech meant more to impress the curious crowd than to be really kind. In the excitement of arriving

Helen had forgotten him. The manner of sudden reminder—the insincerity of it—made her temper flash. She almost fell, encumbered as she was, in her hurry to descend the steps. She saw the tall hunter in gray step forward close to her as she reached for the bag Riggs held.

"Mr. Riggs, I'll carry my bag," she said.

"Let me lug this. You help Bo with hers," he replied familiarly.

"But I want it," she rejoined quietly, with sharp determination. No little force was needed to pull the bag away from Riggs.

"See here, Helen, you ain't goin' any farther with that joke, are you?" he queried deprecatingly, and he still spoke quite loud.

Helen turned her back upon him. The tall hunter had just helped Bo off the car. Then Helen looked up into a smooth bronzed face and piercing gray eyes.

"Are you Helen Rayner?" he asked.

"Yes."

"My name's Dale. I've come to meet you."

"Ah! My uncle sent you?" added Helen in quick relief.

"No, I can't say Al sent me," began the man, "but I reckon—"

He was interrupted by Riggs, who, grasping Helen by the arm, pulled her back a step.

"Say, Mister, did Auchincloss send you to meet my young friends here?" he demanded arrogantly.

Dale's glance turned from Helen to Riggs. She could not read this quiet gray gaze, but it thrilled her.

"No, I come on my own hook," he answered.

"You'll understand, then—they're in my charge," added Riggs.

This time the steady light-gray eyes met Helen's, and if there was not a smile in them or behind them she was still further baffled.

Just then Bo slipped close to her and gave her arm a little squeeze. Probably Bo's thought was like hers—here was a real Western man. That was her first impression, and following swiftly upon it was a sensation of eased nerves.

Riggs swaggered closer to Dale. "Say, Buckskin, I hail from Texas—"

"You're wastin' our time an' we've need to hurry," interrupted Dale. His tone seemed friendly. "An' if you ever lived long in Texas you wouldn't pester a lady an' you sure wouldn't talk like you do."

"What!" shouted Riggs hotly. He dropped his right hand significantly to his hip.

"Don't throw your gun. It might go off," said Dale.

Whatever Riggs's intention had been—and it was probably just what Dale evidently had read it—he now flushed an angry red and jerked at his gun.

Dale's hand flashed too swiftly for Helen's eye to follow it. But she heard the thud as it struck. The gun went flying to the platform and scattered a group of Indians and Mexicans.

"You'll hurt yourself some day," said Dale.

Helen had never heard a slow, cool voice like this hunter's. Without excitement or emotion or hurry, it yet seemed full and significant of things the words did not mean. Bo uttered a strange little exultant cry.

Riggs's arm had dropped limp. No doubt it was numb. He stared, and his predominating expression was surprise. As the shuffling crowd began to snicker and whisper, Riggs gave Dale a malig-

nant glance, shifted it to Helen, and then lurched away in the direction of his gun.

Dale did not pay any more attention to him. Gathering up Helen's baggage, he said, "Come on," and shouldered a lane through the gaping crowd. The girls followed close at his heels.

"Nell! what'd I tell you?" whispered Bo. "Oh, you're all atremble!"

Helen was aware of her unsteadiness; anger and fear and relief in quick succession had left her rather weak. Once through the motley crowd of loungers, she saw an old gray stage-coach and four lean horses. A grizzled, sunburned man sat on the driver's seat, whip and reins in hand. Beside him was a younger man with rifle across his knees. Another man, young, tall, lean, dark, stood holding the coach door open. He touched his sombrero to the girls. His eyes were sharp as he addressed Dale.

"Milt, wasn't you held up?"

"No. But some long-haired galoot was tryin' to hold up the girls. Wanted to throw his gun on me. I was sure scared," replied Dale, as he deposited the luggage.

Bo laughed. Her eyes, resting upon Dale, were warm and bright. The young man at the coach door took a second look at her, and then a smile changed the dark hardness of his face.

Dale helped the girls up the high step into the stage, and then, placing the lighter luggage in with them, he threw the heavier pieces on top.

"Joe, climb up," he said.

"Wal, Milt," drawled the driver, "let's ooze along."

Dale hesitated, with his hand on the door. He glanced at the crowd, now edging close again, and then at Helen.

"I reckon I ought to tell you," he

said, and indecision appeared to concern him.

"What?" exclaimed Helen.

"Bad news. But talkin' takes time. An' we mustn't lose any."

"There's need of hurry?" queried Helen, sitting up sharply.

"I reckon."

"Is this the stage to Snowdrop?"

"No. That leaves in the mornin'. We rustled this old trap to get a start to-night."

"The sooner the better. But I—I don't understand," said Helen, bewildered.

"It'll not be safe for you to ride on the mornin' stage," returned Dale.

"Safe! Oh, what do you mean?" exclaimed Helen. Apprehensively she gazed at him and then back at Bo.

"Explainin' will take time. An' facts may change your mind. But if you can't trust me—"

"Trust you!" interposed Helen blankly. "You mean to take us to Snowdrop?"

"I reckon we'd better go roundabout an' not hit Snowdrop," he replied shortly.

"Then to Pine—to my uncle—Al Auchincloss?"

"Yes, I'm goin' to try hard."

Helen caught her breath. She divined that some peril menaced her. She looked steadily, with all a woman's keenness, into this man's face. The moment was one of the fateful decisions she knew the West had in store for her. Her future and that of Bo's were now to be dependent upon her judgments. It was a hard moment and, though she shivered inwardly, she welcomed the initial and inevitable step.

This man Dale, by his dress of buckskin, must be either scout or hunter. His size, his action, the tone of his voice had been reassuring. But Helen must

decide from what she saw in his face whether or not to trust him. And that face was clear bronze, unlined, unshadowed, like a tranquil mask, clean-cut, strong-jawed, with eyes of wonderful transparent gray.

"Yes, I'll trust you," she said. "Get in, and let us hurry. Then you can explain."

"All ready, Bill. Send 'em along," called Dale.

He climbed into the stage and the driver started off with a crack of the whip. The stage lurched away from the curious crowd and was soon on the stretch of desert that must be crossed before the forest was reached.

And now it was time for Dale to tell the girls about the plot to kidnap Helen, and how he intended to save them. He spoke simply and modestly, but when he had finished the two girls looked at him with shining eyes. Feeling strangely embarrassed, he signaled the driver to stop and got out to ride on top, advising the girls to rest, for soon they would take to horses and the wild forest country.

Some time later the stage stopped again. Helen heard the thud of boots striking the ground, and the snorts of horses.

"Nell, I see horses," whispered Bo excitedly. "There, to the side of the road—and here comes a man. Oh, if he shouldn't be the one they're expecting!"

Helen peered out to see a tall, dark form, moving silently, and beyond it a vague outline of horses, and then pale gleams of what must have been pack loads.

Dale loomed up, and met the stranger in the road.

"Howdy, Milt? You got the girl sure, or you wouldn't be here," said a low voice.

"Roy, I've got two girls—sisters," replied Dale.

The man Roy whistled softly under his breath. Then another lean, rangy form strode out of the darkness, and was met by Dale.

"Now, boys—how about Anson's gang?" queried Dale.

"At Snowdrop, drinkin' an' quarrelin'. Reckon they'll leave there about day-break," replied Roy. "You can be in the pines by then."

"All right," Dale replied. "John, you an' Joe an' Hal ride back to meet the regular stage. An' when you meet it get on an' be on it when Anson holds it up."

"That's shore agreeable to me," drawled John.

"I'd like to be on it, too," said Roy grimly.

"No. I'll need you till I'm safe in the woods, Bill, hand down the bags. An' you, Roy, help me pack them. Did you get all the supplies I wanted?"

"Shore did. If the young ladies ain't powerful particular you can feed them well for a couple of months."

Dale wheeled and, striding to the stage, he opened the door. "Girls, you're not asleep? Come," he called.

Bo stepped down first, and Helen followed.

Dale reached into the stage and hauled out baskets and bags. These he set down on the ground.

"Turn around, Bill, an' go along with you. John an' Hal will follow presently," ordered Dale.

The horses wheeled and stamped, the stage careened and creaked, presently to roll out of sight in the gloom.

"You're shiverin'," said Dale suddenly, looking down upon Helen. She felt his hard hand clasp hers. "Cold as ice!"

"I am c-cold," replied Helen. "I guess we're not warmly dressed."

"Nell, we roasted all day, and now we're freezing," declared Bo. "I didn't know it was winter at night out here."

"Miss, haven't you some warm gloves an' a coat?" asked Roy anxiously. "It ain't begun to get cold yet."

"Nell, we've heavy gloves, riding-suits, and boots—all fine and new—in this black bag," said Bo enthusiastically kicking a bag at her feet.

"Yes, so we have. But a lot of good they'll do us, tonight," returned Helen.

"Miss, you'd do well to change right here," said Roy earnestly. "It'll save time in the long run an' a lot of sufferin' before sunup."

Helen stared at the young man, absolutely amazed with his simplicity. She was advised to change her traveling-dress for a riding-suit—out somewhere in a cold, windy desert—in the middle of the night—among strange young men!

"Bo, which bag is it?" asked Dale, as if she were his sister. And when she indicated the one, he picked it up. "Come off the road."

Bo followed him, and Helen found herself mechanically at their heels. Dale led them a few paces off the road behind some low bushes.

"Hurry an' change here," he said. "We'll make a pack of your outfit an' leave room for this bag."

Then he stalked away and in a few strides disappeared.

Bo sat down to begin unlacing her shoes. Helen could just see her pale, pretty face and big, gleaming eyes by the light of the stars. It struck her then that Bo was going to make eminently more of a success of Western life than she was.

"Nell, those fellows are n-nice," said

Bo reflectively. "Aren't you c-cold? Say, he said hurry!"

It was beyond Helen's comprehension how she ever began to disrobe out there in that open, windy desert, but after she had gotten launched on the task she found that it required more fortitude than courage. The cold wind pierced right through her. Almost she could have laughed at the way Bo made things fly.

"G-g-gee!" chattered Bo. "I n-never w-was so c-c-cold in all my life. Nell Rayner, m-may the g-good Lord forgive y-you!"

Helen was too intent on her own troubles to take breath to talk. She was a strong, healthy girl, swift and efficient with her hands, yet this, the hardest physical ordeal she had ever experienced, almost overcame her. Bo outdistanced her by moments, helped her with buttons, and laced one whole boot for her. Then, with hands that stung, Helen packed the traveling-suits in the bag.

"There! But what an awful mess!" exclaimed Helen. "Oh, Bo, our pretty traveling-dresses!"

"We'll press them to-tomorrow—on a l-log," replied Bo, and giggled.

They started for the road. Bo, strange to note, did not carry her share of the burden, and she seemed unsteady on her feet.

The men were waiting beside a group of horses, one of which carried a pack.

"Nothin' slow about you," said Dale, relieving Helen of the grip. "Roy, put them up while I sling on this bag."

Roy led out two of the horses.

"Get up," he said, indicating Bo. "The stirrups are short on this saddle."

Bo was an adept at mounting, but she made such awkward and slow work

of it in this instance that Helen could not believe her eyes.

"How're the stirrups?" asked Roy. "Stand in them. Guess they're about right. Careful now! Thet hoss is skittish. Hold him in."

Bo was not living up to the reputation with which Helen had credited her.

"Now, Miss, you get up," said Roy to Helen. And in another instant she found herself astride a black, spirited horse. Numb with cold as she was, she yet felt the coursing thrills along her veins.

Roy was at the stirrups with swift hands.

"You're taller'n I guessed," he said. "Stay up, but lift your foot. Shore now, I'm glad you have them thick, soft boots. Mebbe we'll ride all over the White Mountains."

"Bo, do you hear that?" called Helen.

But Bo did not answer. She was leaning rather unnaturally in her saddle. Helen became anxious. Just then Dale strode back to them.

"All cinched up, Roy?"

"Jest ready," replied Roy.

Then Dale stood beside Helen. How tall he was! His wide shoulders seemed on a level with the pommel of her saddle. He put an affectionate hand on the horse.

"His name's Ranger an' he's the fastest an' finest horse in this country."

"I reckon he shore is—along with my bay," corroborated Roy.

"Roy, if you rode Ranger he'd beat your pet," said Dale. "We can start now. Roy, you drive the pack horses."

He took another look at Helen's saddle and then moved to do likewise with Bo's.

"Are you — all right?" he asked quickly.

Bo reeled in her seat. "I'm n-near froze," she replied in a faint voice. Her face shone white in the starlight. Helen recognized that Bo was more than cold.

"Oh, Bo!" she called in distress.

"Nell, don't you worry, now."

"Let me carry you," suggested Dale.

"No. I'll s-s-stick on this horse or d-die," fiercely retorted Bo.

The two men looked up at her white face and then at each other. Then Roy walked away toward the dark bunch of horses off the road and Dale swung astride the one horse left.

"Keep close to me," he said.

Bo fell in line and Helen brought up the rear.

Helen imagined she was near the end of a dream. Presently she would awaken with a start and see the pale walls of her little room at home, and hear the cherry branches brushing her window, and the old clarion-voiced cock proclaim the hour of dawn.

CHAPTER SIX

Paradise Park

THERE ensued the most trying period of Helen's life. Dale, fearing that Snake Anson would learn of his intervention and strike their trail, pushed on resolutely toward his camp. This meant long hours on horse-back, traveling through difficult country.

The girls suffered. After the second day they found it agony to walk, and agony to ride. But still their spirits were high.

Bo, Helen saw, took enthusiastically to this country, despite her hurts. She

herself was both thrilled and repelled by it. Its raw, violent nature seemed the very negation of the ideals which she had acquired in the East. And she marveled at the stern-faced Dale, who seemed so much a part of this strange and fearful land.

There was, however, little time for these reflections. They spent whole days in the saddle, and when night came she was only too glad to fall into heavy sleep.

They arrived finally at Dale's camp. He had gone on ahead and had food ready when Roy appeared with the girls. In a daze of exhaustion they ate, and immediately went to bed in a lean-to which Dale had built for them.

When Helen awoke, all was bright. She realized guiltily that they had almost slept the clock around. Waking Bo, she arose and washed at the spring. A few minutes later two fresh-eyed, tastefully-dressed girls presented themselves at the campfire, attracted by the appetizing odors drifting from it.

Helen's eye was attracted by moving objects near at hand. Then simultaneously with Bo's cry of delight Helen saw a beautiful doe approaching under the trees. Dale walked beside it.

"You sure had a long sleep," was the hunter's greeting. "I reckon you both look better."

"Good morning. Or is it afternoon? We're just able to move about," said Helen.

"I could ride," declared Bo stoutly. "Oh, Nell, look at the deer! It's coming to me."

The doe had hung back a little as Dale reached the campfire. It was a gray, slender creature, smooth as silk, with great dark eyes. It stood a moment, long ears erect, and then with a graceful little trot came up to Bo and reached

a slim nose for her outstretched hand. All about it, except the beautiful soft eyes, seemed wild, and yet it was as tame as a kitten. Then, suddenly, as Bo fondled the long ears, it gave a start and, breaking away, ran back out of sight under the pines.

"What frightened it?" asked Bo.

Dale pointed up at the wall under the shelving roof of rock. There, twenty feet from the ground, curled up on a ledge, lay a huge tawny animal with a face like that of a cat.

"She's afraid of Tom," replied Dale.

"Oh! So that's Tom—the pet lion!" exclaimed Bo. "Ugh! No wonder that deer ran off!"

"How long has he been up there?" queried Helen, gazing fascinated at Dale's famous pet.

"I couldn't say. Tom comes an' goes," replied Dale. "But I sent him up there last night."

"And he was there—perfectly free—right over us—while we slept!" burst out Bo.

"Yes. An' I reckon you slept the safer for that."

"Of all things! Nell, isn't he a monster? But he doesn't look like a lion—an African lion. He's a panther. I saw his like at the circus once."

"He's a cougar," said Dale. "The panther is long and slim. Tom is not only long, but thick an' round. I've had him four years. An' he was a kitten no bigger'n my fist when I got him."

"Is he perfectly tame—safe?" asked Helen anxiously.

"I've never told anybody that Tom was safe, but he is," replied Dale. "You can absolutely believe it. A wild cougar wouldn't attack a man unless cornered or starved. An' Tom is like a big kitten."

The beast raised his great catlike

face, with its sleepy, half-shut eyes, and looked down upon them.

"Shall I call him down?" inquired Dale.

For once Bo did not find her voice.

"Let us—get a little more used to him—at a distance," replied Helen with a little laugh.

"If he comes to you, just rub his head an' you'll see how tame he is," said Dale. "Reckon you're both hungry?"

"Not so very," returned Helen, aware of his penetrating gray gaze upon her.

"Well, I am," vouchsafed Bo.

"Soon as the turkey's done we'll eat. My camp is round between the rocks. I'll call you."

Not until his broad back was turned did Helen notice that the hunter looked different. Then she saw he wore a lighter, cleaner suit of buckskin, with no coat, and instead of the high-heeled horseman's boots he wore moccasins and leggings. The change made him appear more lithe.

"Nell, I don't know what you think, but I call him handsome," declared Bo.

Helen had no idea what she thought. "Let's try to walk some," she suggested.

So they essayed that painful task and got as far as a pine log some few rods from their camp. This point was close to the edge of the park, from which there was an unobstructed view.

"My! What a place!" exclaimed Bo, with eyes wide and round.

"Oh, beautiful!" breathed Helen.

An unexpected blaze of color drew her gaze first. Out of the black spruce slopes shone patches of aspens, gloriously red and gold, and low down along the edge of timber troops of aspens ran out into the park, not yet so blazing

as those above, but purple and yellow and white in the sunshine. Masses of silver spruce, like trees in moonlight, bordered the park, sending out here and there an isolated tree, sharp as a spear, with under branches close to the ground. Long golden-green grass, resembling half-ripe wheat, covered the entire floor of the park, gently waving to the wind.

Above sheered the black, gold-patched slopes, steep and unscalable, rising to buttresses of dark, iron-hued rock. And to the east circled the rows of cliff-bench, gray and old and fringed, splitting at the top in the notch where the lacy, slumberous waterfall, like white smoke, fell and vanished, to reappear in wider sheet of lace, only to fall and vanish again in the green depths.

It was a verdant valley, deep-set in the mountain walls, wild and sad and lonesome. The waterfall dominated the spirit of the place, dreamy and sleepy and tranquil; it murmured sweetly on one breath of wind, and lulled with another, and sometimes died out altogether, only to come again in soft, strange roar.

"Paradise Park!" whispered Bo to herself.

A call from Dale disturbed their raptures. Turning, they hobbled with eager but painful steps in the direction of a larger campfire, situated to the right of the great rock that sheltered their lean-to. No hut or house showed there and none was needed. Hiding-places and homes for a hundred hunters were there in the sections of caverned cliffs, split off in bygone ages from the mountain wall above. A few stately pines stood out from the rocks, and a clump of silver spruce ran down to a brown brook.

This camp was only a step from the lean-to, round the corner of a huge rock, yet it had been out of sight. Here indeed was evidence of a hunter's home—pelts and skins and antlers, a neat pile of split firewood, a long ledge of rock, well sheltered, and loaded with bags like a huge pantry shelf, packs and ropes and saddles, tools and weapons, and a platform of dry brush as shelter for a fire around which hung on poles a various assortment of utensils for camp.

"Hyar—you git!" shouted Dale, and he threw a stick at something.

A bear cub scampered away in haste. He was small and woolly and brown, and he grunted as he ran. Soon he halted.

"That's Bud," said Dale, as the girls came up. "Guess he near starved in my absence. An' now he wants everythin', especially the sugar. We don't have sugar often up here."

"Isn't he dear? Oh, I love him!" cried Bo. "Come back, Bud. Come, Buddie."

The cub, however, kept his distance, watching Dale with bright little eyes.

"Where's Mr. Roy?" asked Helen.

"Roy's gone. He was sorry not to say good-by. But it's important he gets down in the pines on Anson's trail. He'll hang to Anson, an' in case they get near Pine he'll ride in to see where your uncle is."

"What do you expect?" questioned Helen gravely.

"Most anythin'," he replied. "Al, I reckon, knows now. Maybe he's rustlin' into the mountains by this time. If he meets up with Anson, well an' good, for Roy won't be far off. An' sure if he runs across Roy, why they'll soon be here. But if I were you I wouldn't count on seein' your uncle very soon.

I'm sorry. I've done my best. It sure is a bad deal."

"Don't think me ungracious," replied Helen hastily. How plainly he had intimated that it must be privation and annoyance for her to be compelled to accept his hospitality! "You are good—kind. I owe you much. I'll be eternally grateful."

"You may have to stay here with me—for weeks—maybe months—if we've the bad luck to get snowed in," he said slowly, as if startled at this deduction. "You're safe here. No sheep thief could ever find this camp. I'll take risks to get you safe into Al's hands. But I'm goin' to be pretty sure about what I'm doin'. So—there's plenty to eat an' it's a pretty place."

"Pretty! Why, it's grand!" exclaimed Bo. "I've called it Paradise Park."

"Paradise Park," he repeated, weighing the words. "You've named it an' also the creek. Paradise Creek! I've been here twelve years with no fit name for my home till you said that."

There was a clean tarpaulin upon which were spread steaming, fragrant pans—roast turkey, hot biscuits and gravy, mashed potatoes as white as if prepared at home, stewed dried apples, and butter and coffee. This bounteous repast surprised and delighted the girls; when they had once tasted the roast wild turkey, then Milt Dale had occasion to blush at their encomiums.

"I hope—Uncle Al—doesn't come for a month," declared Bo as she tried to get her breath. There was a brown spot on her nose and one on each cheek, suspiciously close to her mouth.

Dale laughed. It was pleasant to hear him, for his laugh seemed unused and deep.

"Won't you eat with us?" asked Helen.



"Reckon I will," he said. "It'll save time, an' hot grub tastes better."

Quite an interval of silence ensued, which presently was broken by Dale.

"Here comes Tom."

Helen observed with a thrill that the cougar was magnificent, seen erect on all-fours, approaching with slow, sinuous grace. His color was tawny, with spots of whitish gray. He had bowlegs, big and round and furry, and a huge head with great tawny eyes. No matter how tame he was said to be, he looked wild. Like a dog he walked right up, and it so happened that he was directly behind Bo, within reach of her when she turned.

"Oh, Lord!" cried Bo, and up went both of her hands, in one of which was a huge piece of turkey. Tom took it, not viciously, but nevertheless with a snap that made Helen jump.

"He stole my turkey!"

"Tom, come here," ordered Dale.

Tom crouched on all fours, his head resting on his paws, with his beautiful tawny eyes, light and piercing, fixed upon the hunter.

"Don't grab," said Dale, holding out a piece of turkey. Whereupon Tom took it less voraciously.

As it happened, the little bear cub saw this transaction, and he plainly

indicated his opinion of the preference shown to Tom.

"Oh, the dear!" exclaimed Bo. "He means it's not fair. Come, Bud—come on."

But Bud would not approach the group until called by Dale. Then he scrambled to them with every manifestation of delight. Bo almost forgot her own needs in feeding him and getting acquainted with him. Tom plainly showed his jealousy of Bud and Bud likewise showed his fear of the great cat.

Helen could not believe the evidence of her eyes—that she was in the woods calmly and hungrily partaking of sweet, wild-flavored meat—that a full-grown mountain lion lay on one side of her and a baby brown bear sat on the other—that a strange hunter, a man of the forest, there in his lonely and isolated fastness, appealed to the romance in her and interested her as no one else she had ever met.

This feeling mounted in her as the days passed. Even Bo noticed it, and teased her unmercifully, until she noticed that Helen was indeed serious.

The time passed quickly enough, for there was much for the girls to learn. Bo quickly proved herself a capable rider, and Helen too was soon sitting a horse with ease. The tame and nearly tame animals about the camp provided almost endless sources of amusement. And at night, sitting about the fire, Helen thrilled to hear Dale's deep, quiet voice telling what he had learned during his years of self-imposed exile.

So much did Helen give herself to this life, to the magic of the forest, that she felt a pang of sorrow one morning, weeks after they had arrived at the camp, when she was awakened by Bo's wild shouting.

CHAPTER SEVEN

Good-by to Paradise

NELL! Nell! Wake up!" called Bo wildly. "Oh, someone has come! Horses and men!"

Helen got to her knees and peered out over Bo's shoulder. Dale, standing tall and striking beside the campfire, was waving his sombrero. Away down the open edge of the park came a string of pack burros with mounted men behind. In the foremost rider Helen recognized Roy Beeman.

"That first one's Roy!" she exclaimed. "I'd never forget him on a horse. Bo, it must mean Uncle Al's come!"

"Sure! We're born lucky. Here we are safe and sound—and all this grand camp trip. Look at the cowboys. *Look!* Oh, maybe this isn't great!" babbled Bo.

Dale wheeled to see the girls peeping out. "It's time you're up!" he called. "Your uncle Al is here."

For an instant after Helen sank back out of Dale's sight she sat there perfectly motionless, so struck was she by the singular tone of Dale's voice. She imagined that he regretted what this visiting cavalcade of horsemen meant—they had come to take her to her ranch in Pine. Helen's heart suddenly began to beat fast, but thickly, as if muffled within her breast.

"Hurry now, girls," called Dale.

Bo was already out, kneeling on the flat stone at the little brook, splashing water in a great hurry. Helen's hands trembled so that she could scarcely lace her boots or brush her hair, and she was long behind Bo in making herself presentable. When Helen stepped out, a short, powerfully built man in

coarse garb and heavy boots stood holding Bo's hands.

"Wal, wal! You favor the Rayners," he was saying. "I remember your dad, an' a fine feller he was."

Beside them stood Dale and Roy, and beyond was a group of horses and riders.

"Uncle, here comes Nell," said Bo softly.

"Aw!" The old cattleman breathed hard as he turned.

Helen hurried. She had not expected to remember this uncle, but one look into the brown, beaming face, with the blue eyes flashing, yet sad, and she recognized him, at the same instant recalling her mother.

He held out his arms to receive her.

"Nell Auchincloss all over again!" he exclaimed in deep voice, as he kissed her. "I'd have knowed you anywhere!"

"Uncle Al!" murmured Helen. "I remember you—though I was only four."

"Wal, wal, that's fine," he replied. "I remember you straddled my knee once, an' your hair was brighter—an' curly. An' you'r twenty now? What a fine, broad-shouldered girl you are! An' Nell, you're the handsomest Auchincloss I ever seen!"

Helen found herself blushing, and withdrew her hands from his as Roy stepped forward to pay his respects. He stood bareheaded, lean and tall, with neither his clear eyes nor his still face, nor the proffered hand expressing anything of the proven quality of fidelity, of achievement, that Helen sensed in him.

"Howdy, Miss Helen? Howdy, Bo?" he said. "You-all both look fine an' brown. I reckon I was shore slow rustlin' your uncle Al up here. But I was

figgerin' you'd like Milt's camp for a while."

"We sure did," replied Bo archly.

"Aw!" breathed Auchincloss heavily. "Lemme set down."

He drew the girls to the rustic seat Dale had built for them under the big pine.

"Oh, you must be tired! How—how are you?" asked Helen anxiously.

"Tired! Wal, if I am it's jest this here minit. When Joe Beeman rode in on me with thet news of you—wal, I jest fergot I was a worn-out old hoss. Haven't felt so good in years. Mebbe two such young an' pretty nieces will make a new man of me."

"Uncle Al, you look strong and well to me," said Bo. "And young, too, and—"

"Haw! Haw! Thet'll do," interrupted Al. "I see through you. What you'll do to Uncle Al will be aplenty. Yes, girls, I'm feelin' fine. But strange—strange! Mebbe thet's my joy at seein' you safe—safe when I feared so thet damned greaser Beasley—"

In Helen's grave gaze his face changed swiftly—and all the serried years of toil and battle and privation showed, with something that was not age, nor resignation, yet as tragic as both.

"Wal, never mind him—now," he added slowly, and the warmer light returned to his face. "Dale—come here."

The hunter stepped closer.

"I reckon I owe you more'n I can ever pay," said Auchincloss, with an arm around each niece.

"No, Al, you don't owe me anythin'," returned Dale thoughtfully, as he looked away.

"A-huh!" grunted Al. "You hear him, girls. Now listen, you wild hunter. An' you girls listen—Milt, I never thought you much good, 'cept for the wilds. But

I reckon I'll have to swallow thet. I do. Comin' to me as you did—an' after bein' druv off—keepin' your council an' savin' my girls from thet holdup, wal, it's the biggest deal any man ever did for me. An' I'm ashamed of my hard feelin's, an' here's my hand."

"Thanks, Al," replied Dale with his fleeting smile, and he met the proffered hand. "Now, will you be makin' camp here?"

"Wal, no. I'll rest a bit, an' you can pack the girls' outfit—then we'll go. Sure you're goin' with us?"

"I'll call the girls to breakfast," replied Dale, and he moved away without answering Auchincloss's query.

Helen divined that Dale did not mean to go down to Pine with them, and the knowledge gave her a blank feeling of surprise. Had she expected him to go?

"Come here, Jeff," called Al to one of his men.

A short, bowlegged horseman with dusty garb and sun-bleached face hobbled forth from the group. He was not young, but he had a boyish grin and bright little eyes. Awkwardly he doffed his slouch sombrero.

"Jeff, shake hands with my nieces," said Al. "This's Helen, an' your boss from now on. An' this's Bo, fer short. Her name was Nancy, but when she lay a baby in her cradle I called her Bo-Peep, an' the name's stuck. Girls, this here's my foreman, Jeff Mulvey, who's been with me twenty years."

The introduction caused embarrassment to all three principals, particularly to Jeff.

"Nell, reckon you'll have fun bossin' thet outfit," chuckled Al. "None of 'em's got a wife. Lot of scalawags they are; no women would have them!"

With that he turned to Bo, and, after

studying her pretty face, he asked, in apparently severe tone, "Did you send a cowboy named Carmichael to ask me for a job?"

Bo looked quite startled. "Carmichael! Why, Uncle, I never heard that name before," replied Bo bewilderedly.

"A-huh! Reckoned the young rascal was lyin'," said Auchincloss. "But I liked the feller's looks an' so let him stay."

Then the rancher turned to the group of lounging riders. "Las Vegas, come here," he ordered in a loud voice.

Helen thrilled at sight of a tall, superbly built cowboy reluctantly detaching himself from the group. He had a red-bronze face, young like a boy's. Helen recognized it, and the flowing red scarf, and the swinging gun, and the slow, spur-clinking gait. No other than Bo's Las Vegas cowboy admirer!

Then Helen flashed a look at Bo, which look gave her a delicious, almost irresistible desire to laugh. That young lady also recognized the reluctant individual approaching with flushed and downcast face. Helen recorded her first experience of Bo's utter discomfiture. Bo turned white—then red as a rose.

"Say, my niece said she never heard of the name Carmichael," declared Al severely, as the cowboy halted before him. Helen knew her uncle had the repute of dealing hard with his men, but here she was reassured and pleased at the twinkle in his eye.

"Shore, Boss, I can't help thet," drawled the cowboy. "It's good old Texas stock."

"Texas! You fellers from the Panhandle are always hollerin' Texas. I never seen thet Texans had anyone else beat—say from Missouri," returned Al testily.

Carmichael maintained a discreet silence, and carefully avoided looking at the girls.

"Wal, reckon we'll all call you Las Vegas, anyway," continued the rancher. "Didn't you say my niece sent you to me for a job?"

Whereupon Carmichael's easy manner vanished. "Now, Boss, shore my memory's pore," he said. "I only says—"

"Don't tell me thet. My memory's not p-o-r-e," replied Al, mimicking the drawl. "What you said was thet my niece would speak a good word for you."

Here Carmichael stole a timid glance at Bo, the result of which was to render him utterly crestfallen. Not improbably he had taken Bo's expression to mean something it did not, for Helen read it as a mingling of consternation and fright. Her eyes were big and blazing; a red spot was growing in each cheek as she gathered strength from his confusion.

"Well, didn't you?" demanded Al.

"Yes, sir, I did," suddenly replied the cowboy.

"A-huh! All right, here's my niece. Now see thet she speaks the good word."

Carmichael looked at Bo and Bo looked at him. Their glances were strange, wondering, and they grew shy. Bo dropped hers. The cowboy apparently forgot what had been demanded of him.

Helen put a hand on the old rancher's arm.

"Uncle, what happened was my fault," she said. "The train stopped at Las Vegas. This young man saw us at the open window. He must have guessed we were lonely, homesick girls, getting lost in the West. For he spokę to us—"

nice and friendly. He knew of you. And he asked, in what I took for fun, if we thought you would give him a job. And I replied, just to tease Bo, that she would surely speak a good word for him."

"Haw! Haw! So that's it," replied Al, and he turned to Bo with merry eyes. "Wal, I kept this here Las Vegas Carmichael on his say-so. Come on with your good word, unless you want to see him lose his job."

Bo did not grasp her uncle's bantering, because she was seriously gazing at the cowboy. But she had grasped something.

"He—he was the first person—out West—to speak kindly to us," she said, facing her uncle.

"Wal, thet's a pretty good word, but it ain't enough," responded Al.

Subdued laughter came from the listening group. Carmichael shifted from side to side.

"He—he looks as if he might ride a horse well," ventured Bo.

"Best hossman I ever seen," agreed Al heartily.

"And—and shoot?" added Bo hopefully.

"Bo, he packs thet gun low, like Jim Wilson an' all them Texas gun fighters. Reckon thet ain't no good word."

"Then—I'll vouch for him," said Bo with finality.

"That settles it." Auchincloss turned to the cowboy. "Las Vegas, you're a stranger to us. But you're welcome to a place in the outfit an' I hope you won't never disappoint us."

Carmichael stood before Bo, sombrero in hand, rolling it round and round, manifestly bursting with words he could not speak. And just then the embarrassed young man was saved by

Dale's call to the girls to come to breakfast.

That meal, the last for Helen in Paradise Park, gave rise to a strange and inexplicable restraint. She had little to say. Bo was in the highest spirits, teasing the pets, joking with her uncle and Roy, and even poking fun at Dale. The hunter seemed somewhat somber. Roy was his usual dry, genial self. And Auchincloss, who sat near by, was an interested spectator. When Tom put in an appearance, lounging with his feline grace into the camp, as if he knew he was a privileged pet, the rancher could scarcely contain himself.

"Dale, it's thet damn cougar!" he ejaculated.

"Sure, that's Tom."

"He ought to be corralled or chained. I've no use for cougars," protested Al.

"Uncle Al, Tom sleeps curled up at the foot of my bed," said Bo.

"Aw—what?"

"Honest Injun," she responded. "Well, isn't it so?"

Helen smiling nodded her corroboration. Then Bo called Tom to her and made him lie with his head on his stretched paws, right beside her, and beg for bits to eat.

"Wal! I'd never have believed thet!" exclaimed Al, shaking his big head. "Dale, it's one on me. I've had them big cats foller me on the trails, through the woods, moonlight an' dark. An' I've heard 'em let out thet awful cry. They ain't any wild sound on earth thet can beat a cougar's. Does this Tom ever let out one of them wails?"

"Sometimes at night," replied Dale.

"Wal, excuse me. Hope you don't fetch the yaller rascal down to Pine."

"I won't."

"But you're goin' down to my ranch."

"What for?"

Al scratched his head and gazed perplexedly at the hunter. "Wal, ain't it customary to visit friends?"

"Thanks, Al. Next time I ride down Pine way—in the spring, perhaps—I'll run over an' see how you are."

"Spring!" ejaculated Auchincloss. Then he shook his head sadly and a faraway look filmed his eyes. "Reckon you'd call some late."

"Al, you'll get well now. These girls—now—they'll cure you. Reckon I never saw you look so good."

Auchincloss did not press his point farther at that time, but after the meal, when the other men came to see Dale's camp and pets, Helen's quick ears caught the renewal of the subject.

"I'm askin' you—will you come?" Auchincloss said low and eagerly.

"No. I wouldn't fit in down there," replied Dale.

"Milt, talk sense. You can't go on forever huntin' bear an' tamin' cats," protested the old rancher.

"Why not?" asked the hunter thoughtfully.

Auchincloss stood up and, shaking himself as if to ward off his testy temper, he put a hand on Dale's arm.

"One reason is you're needed in Pine."

"How? Who needs me?"

"I do. I'm playin' out fast. An' Beasley's my enemy. The ranch an' all I got will go to Nell. Thet ranch will have to be run by a man an' held by a man. Do you savvy? It's a big job. An' I'm offerin' to make you my foreman right now."

"Al, you sort of take my breath," replied Dale. "An' I'm sure grateful. But the fact is, even if I could handle

the job, I—I don't believe I'd want to."

"Make yourself want to, then. Thet'd soon come. You'd get interested. This country will develop. I seen thet years ago. The government is goin' to chase the Apaches out of here. Soon homesteaders will be flockin' in. Big future, Dale. You want to get in now. An'—"

Here Auchincloss hesitated, then spoke lower: "An' take your chance with the girl! I'll be on your side."

A slight vibrating start ran over Dale's stalwart form. "Al—you're plumb dotty!" he exclaimed.

"Dotty! Me? Dotty!" ejaculated Auchincloss. Then he swore. "In a minit I'll tell you what you are."

"But, Al, that talk's so—so—like an old fool's."

"Huh! An' why so?"

"Because that—wonderful girl would never look at me," Dale replied simply.

"I seen her lookin' already," declared Al bluntly.

Dale shook his head as if arguing with the old rancher was hopeless.

"Never mind thet," went on Al. "Mebbe I am a dotty old fool—specially for takin' a shine to you. But I say again—will you come down to Pine an' be my foreman?"

"No," replied Dale.

"Milt, I've no son—an' I'm—afraid of Beasley." This was uttered in an agitated whisper.

"Al, you make me ashamed," said Dale hoarsely. "I can't come. I've no nerve."

"You've no what?"

"Al, I don't know what's wrong with me. But I'm afraid I'd find out if I came down there."

"A-huh! It's the girl!"

"I don't know, but I'm afraid so. An' I won't come."

"Aw, yes, you will—"

Helen rose with beating heart and tingling ears, and moved away out of hearing. She had listened too long to what had not been 'intended for her ears, yet she could not be sorry. She walked a few rods along the brook, out from under the pines, and, standing in the open edge of the park, she felt the beautiful scene still her agitation.

Presently her uncle called her. "Nell, this here hunter wants to give you that black hoss. An' I say you take him."

"Ranger deserves better care than I can give him," said Dale. "He runs free in the woods most of the time. I'd be obliged if she'd have him. An' the hound, Pedro, too."

He smoothed out the blanket and, folding it, he threw it over the horse; and then with one powerful swing he set the saddle in place.

"Thank you very much for him," said Helen softly.

"You're welcome, an' I'm sure glad," responded Dale, and then, after a few deft, strong pulls at the straps, he continued. "There, he's ready for you."

With that he laid an arm over the saddle, and faced Helen as she stood patting and smoothing Ranger. Helen, strong and calm now, in feminine possession of her secret and his, as well as her composure, looked frankly and steadily at Dale. He seemed composed, too, yet the bronze of his fine face was a trifle pale.

"But I can't thank you—I'll never be able to repay you—for your service to me and my sister," said Helen.

"I reckon you needn't try," Dale returned. "An' my service, as you call it, has been good for me."

"Are you going down to Pine with us?"

"No."

"But you will come soon?"

"Not very soon, I reckon," he replied, and averted his gaze.

"When?"

"Hardly before spring."

"Spring? That is a long time. Won't you come to see me sooner than that?"

"If I can get down to Pine."

"You're the first friend I've made in the West," said Helen earnestly.

"I'll be proud to remember."

"But will you remember—will you promise to come to Pine?"

"I reckon."

"Thank you. All's well, then. My friend, good-by."

Ranger stepped out of his own accord and entered the spruce forest. Helen lost sight of Paradise Park. For hours then she rode along a shady, fragrant trail, seeing the beauty of color and wildness, hearing the murmur and rush and roar of water, but all the while her mind revolved the sweet and momentous realization which had thrilled her—that the hunter, this strange man of the forest, so deeply versed in nature and so unfamiliar with emotion, aloof and simple and strong like the elements which had developed him, had fallen in love with her and did not know it.

CHAPTER EIGHT

Shadow of Disaster

DRIPPING her knitting into her lap, Helen Rayner sat pensively gazing out of the window over the bare yellow

ranges of her uncle's ranch.

The winter day was bright, but steely, and the wind that whipped down from the white-capped mountains had a keen,

frosty edge. A scant snow lay in protected places; cattle stood bunched in the lee of ridges; low sheets of dust scurried across the flats.

The big living-room of the ranch house was warm and comfortable with its red adobe walls, its huge stone fireplace where cedar logs blazed, and its many-colored blankets. Bo Rayner sat before the fire, curled up in an armchair, absorbed in a book. On the floor lay the hound Pedro, his racy, fine head stretched toward the warmth.

"Did Uncle call?" asked Helen, with a start out of her reverie.

"I didn't hear him," replied Bo.

Helen rose to tiptoe across the floor and, softly parting some curtains, she looked into the room where her uncle lay. He was asleep. Sometimes he called out in his slumbers. For weeks now he had been confined to his bed, slowly growing weaker. With a sigh Helen returned to her window seat and took up her work.

"Bo, the sun is bright," she said. "The days are growing longer. I'm so glad."

The yellow ranges rolled away up to the black ridges and they in turn swept up to the cold, white mountains. Helen's gaze seemed to go beyond that snowy barrier. And Bo's keen eyes studied her sister's earnest, sad face.

"Nell, do you ever think of Dale?" she queried suddenly.

The question startled Helen. A slow blush suffused neck and cheek.

"Of course," she replied, as if surprised that Bo should ask such a thing.

"I—I shouldn't have asked that," said Bo softly, and then bent again over her book.

Helen gazed tenderly at that bright, bowed head. In this swift-flying, eventful, busy winter, during which the

management of the ranch had devolved wholly upon Helen, the little sister had grown away from her. Bo had insisted upon her own free will and she had followed it, to the amusement of her uncle, to the concern of Helen, to the dismay and bewilderment of the faithful Mexican housekeeper, and to the undoing of all the young men on the ranch.

Helen had always been hoping and waiting for a favorable hour in which she might find this willful sister once more susceptible to wise and loving influence. But while she hesitated to speak, slow footsteps and a jingle of spurs sounded without, and then came a timid knock. Bo looked up brightly and ran to open the door.

"Oh! It's only—you!" she uttered in withering scorn to the one who knocked.

"How are you-all?" asked a drawling voice.

"Well, *Miss* Carmichael, if that interests you—I'm quite ill," replied Bo freezingly.

"Ill! Aw no, now?"

"It's a fact. If I don't die right off I'll have to be taken back to Missouri," said Bo casually.

"Are you goin' to ask me in?" queried Carmichael bluntly. "It's cold—an' I've got somethin' to say to—"

"To me? Well, you're not backward, I declare," retorted Bo.

"Miss Rayner, I reckon it'll be strange to you—findin' out I didn't come to see you."

"Indeed! No. But what *was* strange was the deluded idea I had—that you meant to apologize to me—like a gentleman. Come in, Mr. Carmichael. My sister is here."

The door closed as Helen turned round. Carmichael stood just inside

with his sombrero in hand, and as he gazed at Bo his lean face seemed hard. In the few months since autumn he had changed—aged, it seemed, and the once young, frank, alert, and careless cowboy traits had merged into the making of a man. Helen knew just how much of a man he really was. He had been her mainstay during all the complex working of the ranch that had fallen upon her shoulders.

"Wal, I reckon you was deluded, all right—if you thought I'd crawl like them other lovers of yours," he said with cool deliberation.

"Other lovers? I think the biggest delusion here is the way you flatter yourself," replied Bo stingingly.

"Me flatter myself? Nope. You don't savvy me. I'm shore hatin' myself these days."

"Small wonder. I certainly hate you—with all my heart!"

At this retort the cowboy dropped his head and did not see Bo flaunt herself out of the room. But he heard the door close, and then slowly came toward Helen.

"How in the world did you offend her so?" asked Helen. "Bo is furious. I never saw her so angry as that."

"Bo makes up to all the fellers," confessed Carmichael, hanging his head. "I took her to the dance last week—over in the town hall. Thet's the first time she'd gone anywhere with me. I shore was proud. But thet dance was hell. Bo carried on somethin' turrible, an' I—"

"You mean she has flirted?"

"Wal, thet Turner boy, who rides for Beasley, he was hot after Bo," returned Carmichael, and he spoke as if memory hurt him. "Reckon I've no use for Turner. He's a fine-lookin', strappin', big cowpuncher, an' calculated to win

the girls. He brags thet he 'can, an' I reckon he's right. Wal, he was always hangin' round Bo. An' he stole one of my dances with Bo. I only had three, an' he comes up to say this one was his.

"Bo, very innocent—oh, she's a cute one!—she says, 'Why, Mister Turner—is it really yours?' An' she looked so full of joy thet when he says to me, 'Excoose us, friend Carmichael,' I sat there like a locoed jackass an' let them go. But I wasn't mad at thet. He was a better dancer than me an' I wanted her to have a good time. What started the hell was I seen him put his arm round her when it wasn't just time, accordin' to the dance, an' Bo—she didn't break any records gettin' away from him. She pushed him away—after a little—after I near died. Wal, on the way home I had to tell her. I shore did. An' she said what I'd love to forget. Then—then, Miss Nell, I grabbed her—it was outside here by the porch an' all bright moonlight—I grabbed her an' hugged an' kissed her good. When I let her go I says, sorta brave, but I was plumb scared—I says, 'Wal, are you goin' to marry me now?'"

He concluded with a gulp, and looked at Helen with woe in his eyes.

"Oh! What did Bo do?" breathlessly queried Helen.

"She slapped me," he replied. "An' then she says, 'I did like you best, but now I hate you!' And she slammed the door in my face."

"I think you made a great mistake."

"Wal, if I thought so I'd beg her forgiveness. But I reckon I don't. What's more, I feel better than before. I'm only a cowboy an' never was much good till I met her. Then I braced. I got to havin' hopes, studyin' books, an' you know how I've been

lookin' into this ranchin' game. I stopped drinkin' an' saved my money. Wal, she knows all thet. Once she said she was proud of me. But it didn't seem to count big with her. An' if it can't count big I don't want it to count at all. I reckon the madder Bo is at me the more chance I've got. She knows I love her—thet I'd die for her—thet I'm a changed man. An' she knows I never before thought of darin' to touch her hand. An' she knows she flirted with Turner."

"She's only a child," replied Helen. "And all this change—the West—the wildness—and you boys making much of her—why, it's turned her head. But Bo will come out of it true blue. She is good, loving. Her heart is gold."

"Miss Nell, are you on my side?" asked the cowboy wistfully. He was strong and elemental, caught in the toils of some power beyond him.

"Yes, I am," Helen replied earnestly. And she offered her hand.

"Wal, then it'll shore turn out happy," he said, squeezing her hand. His smile was grateful, but there was nothing in it of the victory he hinted at. Some of his ruddy color had gone. 'An' now I want to tell you why I' come."

He had lowered his voice. "Is Al asleep?" he whispered.

"Yes," replied Helen. "He was a little while ago."

"Reckon I'd better shut his door."

Helen watched the cowboy glide across the room and carefully close the door, then return to her with intent eyes. She sensed events in his look, and she divined suddenly that he must feel as if he were her brother.

"Shore I'm the one thet fetches all the bad news to you," he said regretfully.

Helen caught her breath. There had indeed been many little calamities to mar her management of the ranch—loss of cattle, horses, sheep—the desertion of herders to Beasley—failure of freighters to arrive when most needed—fights among the cowboys—and disagreements over long-arranged deals.

"Your uncle Al makes a heap of this here Jeff Mulvey," asserted Carmichael.

"Yes, indeed. Uncle absolutely relies on Jeff," replied Helen.

"Wal, I hate to tell you, Miss Nell," said the cowboy bitterly, "thet Mulvey ain't the man he seems."

"Oh, what do you mean?"

"When your uncle dies Mulvey is goin' over to Beasley an' he's goin' to take all the fellers who'll stick to him."

"Could Jeff be so faithless—after so many years my uncle's foreman? Oh, how do you know?"

"Reckon I guessed long ago. But wasn't shore. Miss Nell, there's a lot in the wind lately, as poor old Al grows weaker. Mulvey has been particular friendly to me an' I've nursed him along, 'cept I wouldn't drink. An' his pards have been particular friends with me, too, more an' more as I loosened up. You see, they was shy of me when I first got here. Today the whole deal showed clear to me like a hoof track in soft ground.

"Bud Lewis, who's bunked with me, come out an' tried to win me over to Beasley—soon as Auchincloss dies. I palavered with Bud an' I wanted to know. But Bud would only say he was goin' along with Jeff an' others of the outfit. I told him I'd reckon over it an' let him know. He thinks I'll come round."

"Why—why will these men leave me when—when—Oh, poor Uncle! They

bargain on his death. But why—tell me why?"

"Beasley has worked on them—won them over," replied Carmichael grimly. "After Al dies the ranch will go to you. Beasley means to have it. He an' Al was pard once, an' now Beasley has most folks here believin' he got the short end of that deal. He'll have papers—shore—an' he'll have most of the men. So he'll just put you off an' take possession. That's all, Miss Nell, an' you can rely on its bein' true."

"I—I believe you—but I can't believe such—such robbery possible," gasped Helen.

"It's simple as two an' two. Possession is law out here. Once Beasley gets on the ground it's settled. What could you do with no men to fight for your property?"

"But, surely, some of the men will stay with me?"

"I reckon. But not enough."

"Then I can hire more. The Beeman boys. And Dale would come to help me."

"Dale would come. An' he'd help a heap. I wish he was here," replied Carmichael soberly. "But there's no way to get him. He's snowed-up till May."

"I dare not confide in Uncle," said Helen, with agitation. "The shock might kill him. Then to tell him of the unfaithfulness of his old men—that would be cruel. Oh, it can't be so bad as you think."

"I reckon it couldn't be no worse. An'—Miss Nell, there's only one way to get out of it—an' that's the way of the West."

"How?" queried Helen eagerly.

"I seen Beasley go in the saloon as I rode past. Suppose I go down there, pick a quarrel with him—an' kill him?"

Helen sat bolt upright with a cold shock.

"Carmichael! you're not serious?" she exclaimed.

"Serious? I shore am. That's the only way, Miss Nell. An' I reckon it's what Al would want. An'—between you an' me—it would be easier than ropin' a calf. These fellers round Pine don't savvy guns. Now, I come from where guns mean somethin'. An' when I tell you I can throw a gun slick an' fast, why I shore ain't braggin'. You needn't worry none about me Miss Nell."

"You'd—kill Beasley—just because there are rumors of his—treachery?" gasped Helen.

"Shore. It'll have to be done, anyhow," replied the cowboy.

"No! No! It's too dreadful to think of. Why, that would be murder. I—I can't understand how you speak of it—so—so calmly."

"Reckon I ain't doin' it calmly. I'm mad as hell," said Carmichael with a reckless smile.

"Oh, if you are serious then, I say no—no—no! I forbid you. I don't believe I'll be robbed of my property."

"Wal, supposin' Beasley does put you off—an' takes possession. What're you goin' to say then?" demanded the cowboy in slow, cool deliberation.

"I'd say the same then as now," she replied.

"Shore you girls haven't been West very long," he muttered, as if apologizing for them. "An' I reckon it takes time to learn the ways of a country."

"West or no West, I won't have fights deliberately picked, and men shot, even if they do threaten me," declared Helen positively.

"All right, Miss Nell, shore I respect your wishes," he returned. "But I'll tell you this. If Beasley turns you an' Bo out of your home—wal, I'll look him up on my own account."

Helen could only gaze at him as he backed to the door, and she thrilled and shuddered at what seemed his loyalty to her, his love for Bo, and that which was inevitable in himself.

"Reckon you might save us all some trouble—now—if you'd—just get mad—an' let me go after that greaser."

"Greaser! Do you mean Beasley?"

"Shore. He's a half-breed. He was born in Magdalena, where I heard folks say nary one of his parents was no good."

"That doesn't matter. I'm thinking of humanity—of law and order. Of what is right."

"Wal, Miss Nell, I'll wait till you get real mad—or till Beasley—"

"But, my friend, I'll not get mad," interrupted Helen. "I'll keep my temper."

"I'll bet you don't," he retorted. "Mebbe you think you've none of Bo in you. But I'll bet you could get so real—once you started—that you'd be turrible. What've you got them eyes for, Miss Nell, if you ain't an Auchincloss?"

CHAPTER NINE

Riggs's Mistake

WHEN spring came at last and the willows drooped green and fresh over the brook and the range rang with bray of burro and whistle of stallion, old Al Auchincloss had been a month in his grave.

To Helen it seemed longer. The month had been crowded with work, events, and growing, more hopeful duties, so that it contained a world of living. The uncle had not been forgotten, but

the innumerable restrictions to development and progress were no longer manifest. Beasley had not presented himself or any claim upon Helen; and she, gathering confidence day by day, began to believe all that purport of trouble had been exaggerated.

This bright, fresh morning, in March, Helen came out upon the porch to revel a little in the warmth of sunshine and the crisp, pine-scented wind that swept down from the mountains. There was never a morning that she did not gaze mountainward, trying to see, with a folly she realized, if the snow had melted more perceptibly away on the bold white ridge. For all she could see it had not melted an inch, and she would not confess why she sighed. The desert had become green and fresh, stretching away there far below her range, growing dark and purple in the distance with vague buttes rising. The air was full of sound—notes of blackbirds and the *baas* of sheep, and blasts from the corrals, and the clatter of light hoofs on the court below.

Bo was riding in from the stables. Helen loved to watch her on one of those fiery little mustangs, but the sight was likewise given to rousing apprehensions. This morning Bo appeared particularly bent on frightening Helen. Down the lane Carmichael appeared, waving his arms, and Helen at once connected him with Bo's manifest desire to fly away from that particular place.

Since that day, a month back, when Bo had confessed her love for Carmichael, she and Helen had not spoken of it or of the cowboy. The boy and girl were still at odds. But this did not worry Helen. Bo had changed much for the better, especially in that she

devoted herself to Helen and to her work. Helen knew that all would turn out well in the end, and so she had been careful of her rather precarious position between these two young firebrands.

Bo reined in the mustang at the porch steps. She wore a buckskin riding-suit which she had made herself, and its soft gray with the touches of red beads was mightily becoming to her. Then she had grown considerably during the winter and now looked too flashing and pretty to resemble a boy, yet singularly healthy and strong and lithe. Red spots shone in her cheeks and her eyes held that ever-dangerous blaze.

"Nell, did you give me away to that cowboy?" she demanded.

"Give you away!" exclaimed Helen blankly.

"Yes. You know I told you—awhile back—that I was wildly in love with him. Did you give me away—tell on me?"

"Why, Bo! How could you? No. I did not," replied Helen.

"Never gave him a hint?"

"Not even a hint. You have my word for that. Why? What's happened?"

"He makes me sick."

Bo would not say any more, owing to the near approach of the cowboy.

"Mawnin', Miss Nell," he drawled. "I was just tellin' this here Miss Bo-Peep Rayner—"

"Don't call me that!" broke in Bo with fire in her voice.

"Wal, I was just tellin' her thet she wasn't goin' off on any more of them long rides. Honest now, Miss Nell, it ain't safe, an'—"

"You're not my boss," retorted Bo.

"Indeed, sister, I agree with him. You won't obey me."

"Reckon someone's got to be your boss," drawled Carmichael. "Shore I ain't hankerin' for the job. You could ride to Kingdom Come or off among the Apaches—or over here a ways"—at this he grinned knowingly—"or anywheres, for all I cared. But I'm workin' for Miss Nell, an' she's boss. An' if she says you're not to take them rides—you won't. Savvy that, Miss?"

"Mis-ter Carmichael, may I ask how you are going to prevent me from riding where I like?"

"Wal, if you're goin' worse locoed this way I'll keep you off'n a hoss if I have to rope you an' tie you up. By golly, I will!"

His dry humor was gone and manifestly he meant what he said.

"Wal," she drawled it very softly and sweetly, but venomously, "if—you—ever—touch—me again!"

"You an' me will never get along," he said with a dignity full of pathos. "I seen' that a month back when you changed sudden-like to me. But nothin' I say to you has any reckonin' of mine. I'm talkin' for your sister. It's for her sake. An' your own. I never told her an' I never told you thet I've seen Riggs sneak in' after you twice on them desert rides. Wal, I tell you now."

The intelligence apparently had not the slightest effect on Bo. But Helen was astonished and alarmed.

"Riggs! Oh, Bo, I've seen him myself—riding around. He does not mean well. You must be careful."

"If I ketch him again," went on Carmichael with his mouth lining hard, "I'm goin' after him."

He gave her a cool, intent, piercing look, then he dropped his head and turned away, to stride back toward the corrals.

"A month back—when I changed

sudden-like," mused Bo. "I wonder what he meant by that? Nell, did I change—right after the talk you had with me—about him?"

"Indeed you did, Bo," replied Helen. "But it was for the better. Only he can't see it. How proud and sensitive he is! You wouldn't guess it at first. Bo, your reserve has wounded him more than your flirting. He thinks it's indifference."

"Maybe that'll be good for him," declared Bo. "Does he expect me to fall on his neck? He's that thick-headed! Why, he's the locoed one, not me."

"I'd like to ask you, Bo, if you've seen how he has changed?" queried Helen earnestly. "He's older. He's worried. Either his heart is breaking for you or else he fears trouble for us. I fear it's both. How he watches you! Bo, he knows all you do—where you go. That about Riggs sickens me."

"If Riggs follows me and tries any of his four-flush desperado games he'll have his hands full," said Bo grimly. "And that without my cowboy protector! But I just wish Riggs would do something. Then we'll see what Las Vegas Tom Carmichael cares. Then we'll see!"

Bo bit out the last words passionately and jealously, then she lifted her bridle to the spirited mustang.

"Nell, don't you fear for me," she said. "I can take care of myself."

Helen watched her ride away, all but willing to confess that there might be truth in what Bo said. Then Helen went about her work, which consisted of routine duties as well as an earnest study to familiarize herself with continually new and complex conditions of ranch life. Every day brought new problems. She made notes of all that she observed, and all that was told

her, which habit she had found, after a few weeks of trial, was going to be exceedingly valuable to her. She did not intend always to be dependent upon the knowledge of hired men, however faithful some of them might be.

This morning on her rounds she had expected developments of some kind, owing to the presence of Roy Beeman and two of his brothers, who had arrived yesterday. And she was to discover that Jeff Mulvey, accompanied by six of his co-workers and associates, had deserted her without a word or even sending for their pay. Carmichael had predicted this. Helen had half doubted. It was a relief now to be confronted with facts, however disturbing. She had fortified herself to withstand a great deal more trouble than had happened.

At the gateway of the main corral, a huge inclosure fenced high with peeled logs, she met Roy Beeman, lasso in hand, the same tall, lean, limping figure she remembered so well. Sight of him gave her an inexplicable thrill—a flashing memory of an unforgettable night ride. Roy was to have charge of the horses on the ranch, of which there were several hundred, not counting many lost on range and mountain, or the unbranded colts.

Roy took off his sombrero and greeted her. This Mormon had a courtesy for women that spoke well for him.

"It's jest as Las Vegas told us it'd be," he said regretfully. "Mulvey an' his pards lit out this mornin'. I'm sorry, Miss Helen. Reckon that's all because I come over."

"I heard the news," replied Helen. "You needn't be sorry, Roy, for I'm not. I'm glad. I want to know whom I can trust."

"Las Vegas says we're shore in for it now."

"Roy, what do you think?"

"I reckon so. Still, Las Vegas is powerful cross these days an' always lookin' on the dark side. With us boys, now, it's sufficient unto the day is the evil thereof. But, Miss Helen, if Beasley forces the deal there will be serious trouble. I've seen that happen. Four or five years ago Beasley rode some greasers off their farms an' no one ever knowed if he had a just claim."

"Beasley has no claim on my property. My uncle solemnly swore that on his deathbed. And I find nothing in his books or papers of those years when he employed Beasley. In fact, Beasley was never Uncle's partner. The truth is that my uncle took Beasley up when he was a poor, homeless boy."

"So my old dad says," replied Roy. "But what's right don't always prevail in these parts."

"Roy, you're the keenest man I've met since I came West. Tell me what you think will happen."

"I reckon you mean cause an' effect, as Milt Dale would say," responded Roy thoughtfully.

"Ycs. If Beasley attempts to force me off my ranch what will happen?"

"Wal, if Dale an' John get here in time I reckon we can bluff that Beasley outfit."

"You mean my friends—my men would confront Beasley—refuse his demands—and if necessary fight him off?"

"I shore do," replied Roy.

"But suppose you're not all here? Beasley would be smart enough to choose an opportune time. Suppose he did put me off and take possession? What then?"

"Then it'd only be a matter of how soon Dale or Carmichael—or I—got to Beasley."

"Roy! I feared just that. It haunts me. Carmichael asked me to let him go pick a fight with Beasley. Asked me, just as he would ask me about his work! I was shocked. And now you say Dale—and you—" Helen choked in her agitation.

"Miss Helen, what else could you look for? Las Vegas is in love with Miss Bo. Shore he told me so. An' Dale's in love with you! Why, you couldn't stop them any more'n you could stop the wind from blowin' down a pine, when it got ready. Now, it's some different with me. I'm a Mormon an' I'm married. But I'm Dale's pard, these many years. An' I care a powerful sight for you an' Miss Bo. So I reckon I'd draw on Beasley the first chance I got."

Helen incoherently thanked him and, forgetting her usual round of corrals and stables, she hurried back toward the house, deeply stirred, throbbing, and dim-eyed, with a feeling she could not control. Roy Beeman had made a statement that had upset her equilibrium. It seemed simple and natural, yet momentous and staggering.

To hear that Dale loved her—to hear it spoken frankly, earnestly, by Dale's best friend, was strange, sweet, terrifying. But was it true? Her own consciousness had admitted it. Yet that was vastly different from a man's open statement. No longer was it a dear dream, a secret that seemed hers alone. How she had lived on that secret hidden deep in her breast!

Something burned the dimness from her eyes as she looked toward the mountains and her sight became clear, telescopic with its intensity. Magnificently the mountains loomed. Black inroads and patches on the slopes showed where a few days back all had been white. The snow was melting fast. Dale would

soon be free to ride down to Pine. And that was an event Helen prayed for, yet feared as she had never feared anything.

The noonday dinner bell startled Helen from a reverie that was a pleasant aftermath of her unrestraint. How the hours had flown! This morning at least must be credited to indolence.

Bo was not in the dining-room, nor in her own room, nor was she in sight from window or door. This absence had occurred before, but not particularly to disturb Helen. In this instance, however, she grew worried. Her nerves presaged strain. There was an overcharge of sensibility in her feelings or a strange pressure in the very atmosphere. She ate dinner alone, looking her apprehension, which was mitigated by the expressive fears of old Maria, the Mexican woman who served her.

After dinner she sent word to Roy and Carmichael that they had better ride out to look for Bo. Then Helen applied herself resolutely to her books until a rapid clatter of hoofs out in the court caused her to jump up and hurry to the porch. Roy was riding in.

"Did you find her?" queried Helen hurriedly.

"Wasn't no track or sign of her up the north range," replied Roy as he dismounted and threw his bridle. "An' I was ridin' back to take up her tracks from the corral an' trail her. But I seen Las Vegas comin' an' he waved his sombrero. He was comin' up from the south. There he is now."

Carmichael appeared, swinging into the lane. He was mounted on Helen's big black Ranger, and he made the dust fly.

"Wal, he's seen her, that's shore,"

vouchsafed Roy with relief, as Carmichael rode up.

"Miss Nell, she's comin'," said the cowboy as he reined in and slid down with his graceful single motion. Then in a violent action, characteristic of him, he slammed his sombrero down on the porch and threw up both arms. "I've a hunch it's come off!"

"Oh, what?" exclaimed Helen.

"Now, Las Vegas, talk sense," expostulated Roy. "Miss Helen is shore nervous today. Has anythin' happened?"

"I reckon, but I don't know what," replied Carmichael, drawing a long breath. "Folks, I must be gettin' old. For I shore felt orful queer till I seen Bo. She was ridin' down the ridge across the valley. Ridin' some fast, too, an' she'll be here right off, if she doesn't stop in the village."

"Wal, I hear her comin' now," said Roy. "An'—if you asked me I'd say she was ridin' some fast."

Helen heard the light, swift, rhythmic beat of hoofs, and then out on the curve of the road that led down to Pine she saw Bo's mustang, white with lather, coming on a dead run.

"Las Vegas, do you see any Apaches?" asked Roy.

The cowboy made no reply, but he strode out from the porch, directly in front of the mustang. Bo was pulling hard on the bridle, and had him slowing down, but not controlled. When he reached the house it could easily be seen that Bo had pulled him to the limit of her strength, which was not enough to halt him. Carmichael lunged for the bridle and, seizing it, hauled him to a standstill.

At close sight of Bo Helen uttered a startled cry. Bo was white; her sombrero was gone and her hair undone; there

were blood and dirt on her face, and her riding-suit was torn and muddy. She had evidently sustained a fall.

"Well, help me off—somebody," cried Bo premtorily. Her voice was weak, but not her spirit.

Roy sprang to help her off, and when she was down it developed that she was lame.

"Oh, Bo! You've had a tumble," exclaimed Helen anxiously, and she ran to assist Roy. They led her up the porch and to the door. There she turned to look at Carmichael, who was still examining the spent mustang.

"Tell him—to come in," she whispered.

"Hey, there, Las Vegas!" called Roy. "Rustle hyar, will you?"

When Bo had been led into the sitting-room and seated in a chair Carmichael entered. His face was a study, as slowly he walked up to Bo.

"Girl, you—ain't hurt?" he asked huskily.

"It's no fault of yours that I'm not crippled—or dead—or worse," retorted Bo. "You said the south range was the only safe ride for me. And there—I—it happened."

She panted a little and her bosom heaved. One of her gauntlets was gone, and the bare hand, that was bruised and bloody, trembled as she held it out.

"Dear, tell us—are you badly hurt?" queried Helen with hurried gentleness.

"Not much. I've had a spill," replied Bo. "But oh! I'm mad—I'm boiling!"

She looked as if she might have exaggerated her doubt of injuries, but certainly she had not overestimated her state of mind. Any blaze Helen had heretofore seen in those quick eyes was tame compared to this one. It actually leaped. Bo was more than pretty

then. Manifestly Roy was admiring her looks, but Carmichael saw beyond her charm. And slowly he was growing pale.

"I rode out the south range—as I was told," began Bo, breathing hard and trying to control her feelings. "That's the ride you usually take, Nell, and you bet—if you'd taken it today—you'd not be here now. About three miles out I climbed off the range up that cedar slope. I always keep to high ground. When I got up I saw two horsemen ride out of some broken rocks off to the east. They rode as if to come between me and home. I didn't like that. I circled south.

"About a mile farther on I spied another horseman and he showed up directly in front of me and came along slow. That I liked still less. It might have been accident, but it looked to me as if those riders had some intent. All I could do was head off to the south-east and ride. You bet I did ride. But I got into rough ground where I'd never been before. It was slow going. At last I made the cedars and here I cut loose, believing I could circle ahead of those strange riders and come round through Pine. I had it wrong."

Here she hesitated, perhaps for breath, for she had spoken rapidly, or perhaps to get better hold on her subject. Roy sat absorbed, perfectly motionless, eyes keen as steel, his mouth open. Carmichael was gazing over Bo's head, out of the window, and it seemed that he must know the rest of her narrative. Helen knew that her own wide-eyed attention alone would have been all-compelling inspiration to Bo Rayner.

"Sure I had it wrong," resumed Bo. "Pretty soon I heard a horse behind. I looked back. I saw a big bay riding

down on me. Oh, but he was running! He just tore through the cedars. I was scared half out of my senses. But I spurred and beat my mustang. Then began a race! Rough going—thick cedars—washes and gullies! I had to make him run—to keep my saddle—to pick my way. Oh-h-h! but it was glorious! To race for fun—that's one thing; to race for your life is another! My heart was in my mouth—choking me. I couldn't have yelled. I was as cold as ice—dizzy sometimes—blind others—then my stomach turned—and I couldn't get my breath. Yet the wild thrills I had!

"I stuck on and held my own for several miles—to the edge of the cedars. There the big horse gained on me. He came pounding closer—perhaps as close as a hundred yards—I could hear him plain enough. Then I had my spill. Oh, my mustang tripped—threw me 'way over his head. I hit light, but slid far—and that's what scraped me so. I know my knee is raw. When I got to my feet the big horse dashed up, throwing gravel all over me—and his rider jumped off—Now who do you think he was?"

Helen knew, but she did not voice her conviction. Carmichael knew positively, yet he kept silent. Roy was smiling, as if the narrative told did not seem so alarming to him.

"Wal, the fact of you bein' here, safe an' sound, sorta makes no difference who that son-of-a-gun was," he said.

"Riggs! Harve Riggs!" blazed Bo. "The instant I recognized him I got over my scare. And so mad I burned all through like fire. I don't know what I said, but it was wild—and it was a whole lot, you bet.

"You sure can ride," he said.

"I demanded why he had dared to

chase me, and he said he had an important message for Nell. This was it: 'Tell your sister that Beasley means to put her off an' take the ranch. If she'll marry me I'll block his deal. If she won't marry me, I'll go in with Beasley.' Then he told me to hurry home and not to breathe a word to any one except Nell. Well, here I am—and I seem to have been breathing rather fast."

"Wal, I'll be doggoned!" ejaculated Roy feelingly.

Helen laughed. "Indeed, the working of that man's mind is beyond me. Marry him to save my ranch? I wouldn't marry him to save my life!"

Carmichael suddenly broke his silence. "Bo, did you see the other men?"

"Yes. I was coming to that," she replied. "I caught a glimpse of them back in the cedars. The three were together, or, at least, three horsemen were there. They had halted behind some trees. Then on the way home I began to think. Even in my fury I had received impressions. Riggs was *surprised* when I got up. I'll bet he had not expected me to be who I was. He thought I was *Nell*! I look bigger in this buckskin outfit. My hair was up till I lost my hat, and that was when I had the tumble. He took me for Nell.

"Another thing, I remember—he made some sign—some motion while I was calling him names, and I believe that was to keep those other men back. I believe Riggs had a plan with those other men to waylay Nell and make off with her. I absolutely know it."

"Bo, you're so—so—you jump at wild ideas so," protested Helen, trying to believe in her own assurance. But inwardly she was trembling.

"Miss Helen, that ain't a wild idee," said Roy seriously. "I reckon your sister

is pretty close on the trail. Las Vegas, don't you savvy it thet way?"

Carmichael's answer was to stalk out of the room.

"Call him back!" cried Helen apprehensively.

"Hold on, boy!" called Roy sharply.

Helen reached the door simultaneously with Roy. The cowboy picked up his sombrero, jammed it on his head, gave his belt a vicious hitch that made the gun sheath jump, and then in one giant step he was astride Ranger.

"Carmichael! Stay!" cried Helen.

The cowboy spurred the black, and the stone rang under iron-shod hoofs.

"Bo! Call him back! Please call him back!" importuned Helen in distress.

"No use," said Roy quietly. "An' I reckon I'd better trail him up."

He, too, strode out and, mounting his horse, galloped swiftly away.

It turned out that Bo was more bruised and scraped and shaken than she had imagined. One knee was rather badly cut, which injury alone would have kept her from riding again very soon, Helen, who was somewhat skilled bandaging wounds, worried a great deal over these sun-dry blotches on Bo's fair skin, and it took considerable time to wash and dress them. Long after this was done, and during the early supper, and afterward, Bo's excitement remained unabated. The whiteness stayed on her face and the blaze in her eyes. Helen ordered and begged her to go to bed, for the fact was Bo could not stand up and her hands shook.

"Go to bed? Not much," she said. "I want to know what he does to Riggs."

"Dear Bo," appealed Helen, "you don't want—Oh! you do want Carmichael to—to kill Riggs?"

"No, I don't, but I wouldn't care if he did," replied Bo bluntly.

"Do you think—he will?"

"Nell, if that cowboy really loves me he read my mind right here before he left," declared Bo. "And he knew what I thought he'd do."

"And what's—that?" faltered Helen.

"I want him to round Riggs up down in the village—somewhere in a crowd. I want Riggs shown up as the coward, braggart, four-flush that he is. And insulted, slapped, kicked—driven out of Pine!"

Her passionate speech still rang throughout the room when there came footsteps on the porch. Helen hurried to raise the bar from the door and open it just as a tap sounded on the doorpost. Roy's face stood white out of the darkness. His eyes were bright. And his smile made Helen's fearful query needless.

"How are you-all this evenin'?" he drawled, as he came in.

A fire blazed on the hearth and a lamp burned on the table. By their light Bo looked white and eager-eyed as she reclined in the big arm-chair.

"What'd he do?" she asked with all her amazing force.

Roy leaned his lithe, tall form against the stone mantelpiece and faced the girls.

"When I rode out after Las Vegas I seen him 'way down the road," he began rapidly. "An' I seen another man ridin' down into Pine from the other side. Thet was Riggs, only I didn't know it then. Las Vegas rode up to the store, where some fellers was hangin' 'round, an' he spoke to them. When I come up they was all headin' for Turner's saloon. I seen a dozen hosses hitched to the rails. Las Vegas rode on. But I got off at Turner's an' went in with the bunch. Whatever it was Las

Vegas said to them fellers, shore they didn't give him away.

"Pretty soon more men strolled into Turner's an' there got to be 'most twenty altogether, I reckon. Jeff Mulvey was there with his pards. They had been drinkin' sorta free. An' I didn't like the way Mulvey watched me. So I went out an' into the store, but kept a-lookin' for Las Vegas. He wasn't in sight. But I seen Riggs ridin' up. Now, Turner's is where Riggs hangs out an' does his braggin'. He looked powerful deep an' thoughtful, dismounted slow without seein' the onusual number of hosses there, an' then he slouches into Turner's. No more'n a minute after Las Vegas rode down there like a streak. An' just as quick he was off an' through that door."

Roy paused as if to gain force or to choose his words. His tale now appeared all directed to Bo, who gazed at him, spellbound, a fascinated listener.

"Before I got to Turner's door—an' thet was only a little ways—I heard Las Vegas yell. Did you ever hear him? Wal, he's got the wildest yell of any cowpuncher I ever heard. Quick-like I opened the door an' slipped in. There was Riggs an' Las Vegas alone in the center of the big saloon, with the crowd edgin' to the walls an' slidin' back of the bar.

"Riggs was whiter'n a dead man. I didn't hear an' I don't know what Las Vegas yelled at him. But Riggs knew an' so did the gang. All of a sudden every man there shore seen in Las Vegas what Riggs had always bragged he was. That time comes to every man like. Riggs.

"'What'd you call me?' he asked, his jaw shakin'.

"'I ain't called you yet,' answered Las Vegas. 'I just whooped.'

"'What d'ye want?'"

"'You scared my girl.'

"'The hell ye say! Who's she?' blustered Riggs, an' he began to take quick looks 'round. But he never moved a hand. There was somethin' tight about the way he stood. Las Vegas had both arms half out, stretched as if he meant to leap. But he wasn't. I never seen Las Vegas do thet, but when I seen him then I understood it.

"'You know. An' you threatened her an' her sister. Go for your gun,' called Las Vegas, low an' sharp.

"'Thet put the crowd right an' nobody moved. Riggs turned green then. I almost felt sorry for him. He began to shake so he'd dropped a gun if he had pulled one.

"'Hyar, you're off—some mistake—I ain't seen no gurls—I—'

"'Shut up an' draw!' yelled Las Vegas. His voice just pierced holes in the roof, an' it might have been a bullet from the way Riggs collapsed. Every man seen in a second more thet Riggs wouldn't an' couldn't draw. He was afraid for his life. He was not what he had claimed to be. I don't know if he had any friends there. But in the West good men an' bad men, all alike, have no use for Riggs's kind. An' thet stony quiet broke with haw-haw. It shore was as pitiful to see Riggs as it was fine to see Las Vegas.

"'When he dropped his arms then I knowed there would be no gunplay. An' then Las Vegas got red in the face. He slapped Riggs with one hand, then with the other. An' he began to cuss him. I shore never knowed thet Las Vegas Carmichael could use such language. It was a stream of the baddest names known out here, an' lots I never heard of. Now an' then I caught somethin' like 'low-down' an' 'sneak' an'

'four-flush' an' 'long-haired skunk', but for the most part they was just the cussedest kind of names. An' Las Vegas spouted them till he was black in the face, an' foammin' at the mouth, an' hoarser'n a bawlin' cow.

"When he got out of breath from cussin' he punched Riggs all about the saloon, threw him outdoors, knocked him down an' kicked him till he got up, an' then kept kickin' him down the road with the whole haw-hawin' gang behind. An' he drove him out of town!"

CHAPTER TEN

Beasley Proposes

LATE in the afternoon a few days later, at Helen's leisure hour, when she and Bo were in the sitting-room, horses tramped into the court and footsteps mounted the porch. Opening to a loud knock, Helen was surprised to see Beasley. And out in the court were several mounted horsemen. Helen's heart sank. This visit, indeed, had been foreshadowed.

"Afternoon, Miss Rayner," said Beasley, doffing his sombrero. "I've called on a little business deal. Will you see me?"

Helen acknowledged his greeting while she thought rapidly. She might just as well see him and have that inevitable interview done with.

"Come in," she said, and when he had entered she closed the door. "My sister, Mr. Beasley."

"How d'you do, Miss?" said the rancher in a bluff, loud voice.

Bo acknowledged the introduction with a frigid little bow.

At close range Beasley seemed a

forceful personality as well as a rather handsome man of perhaps thirty-five, heavy of build, swarthy of skin, and sloc-black of eye. He looked crafty, confident, and self-centered. If Helen had never heard of him before that visit she would have distrusted him.

"I'd called sooner, but I was waitin' for old José, the Mexican who herded for me when I was pardner to your uncle," said Beasley, and he sat down to put his huge gloved hands on his knees.

"Yes?" queried Helen.

"José rustled over from Magdalena, an' now I can back up my claim—Miss Rayner, this hyar ranch ought to be mine an' is mine. It wasn't so big or so well stocked when Al Auchincloss beat me out of it. I reckon I'll allow for thet. I've papers, an' old José for witness. An' I calculate you'll pay me eighty thousand dollars, or else I'll take over the ranch."

"Mr. Beasley, your claim is no news to me," responded Helen quietly. "I've heard about it. And I questioned my uncle. He swore on his deathbed that he did not owe you a dollar. Indeed, he claimed the indebtedness was yours to him. I could find nothing in his papers, so I must repudiate your claim. I will not take it seriously."

"Miss Rayner, I can't blame you for takin' Al's word against mine," said Beasley. "An' your stand is natural. But you're a stranger here an' you know nothin' of stock deals in these ranges. It ain't fair to speak bad of the dead, but the truth is thet Al Auchincloss got his start by stealin' sheep an' unbranded cattle. Thet was the start of every rancher I know. It was mine. An' we none of us ever thought of it as rustlin'."

Helen could only stare her surprise and doubt at this statement.

"Talk's cheap anywhere an' in the West talk ain't much at all," continued Beasley. "I'm no talker. I jest want to tell my case an' make a deal if you'll have it. I can prove more in black-an' white, an' with witness, than you can. Thet's my case. The deal I'd make is this—let's marry an' settle a bad deal thet way."

The man's direct assumption, absolutely without a qualifying consideration for her woman's attitude, was amazing, ignorant, and base; but Helen was so well prepared for it that she hid her disgust.

"Thank you, Mr. Beasley, but I can't accept your offer," she replied.

"Would you take time an' consider?" he asked, spreading wide his huge gloved hands."

"Absolutely no."

Beasley rose to his feet. He showed no disappointment or chagrin, but the bold pleasantness left his face, and, slight as that change was, it stripped him of the only redeeming quality he showed.

"Thet means I'll force you to pay me eighty thousand or put you off," he said.

"Mr. Beasley, even if I owed you that, how could I raise so enormous a sum? I don't owe it. And I certainly won't be put off my property. You can't put me off."

"An' why can't I?" he demanded with lowering, dark gaze.

"Because your claim is dishonest. And I can prove it," declared Helen forcibly.

"Who're you goin' to prove it to—thet I'm dishonest?"

"To my men—to your men—to the people of Pine—to everybody. There's not a person who won't believe me."

"An' how're you goin' to prove all thet?" he growled.

"Mr. Beasley, do you remember last fall when you met Snake Anson with his gang up in the woods—and hired him to make off with me?" asked Helen in swift, ringing words.

The dark olive of Beasley's bold face shaded to a dirty white. "Wha-at?" he jerked out hoarsely.

"I see you remember. Well, Milt Dale was hidden in the loft of that cabin where you met Anson. He heard every word of your deal with the outlaw."

Beasley swung his arm in sudden violence, so hard that he flung his glove to the floor. As he stooped to snatch it up he uttered a sibilant hiss. Then, stalking to the door, he jerked it open, and slammed it behind him. His loud voice, hoarse with passion, preceded the scrape and crack of hoofs.



Shortly after supper that day, when Helen was just recovering her composure, Carmichael presented himself at the open door. Bo was not there. In the dimming twilight Helen saw that the cowboy was pale, somber, grim.

"Oh, what's happened?" cried Helen.

"Roy's been shot. It come off in Turner's saloon. But he ain't dead. We packed him over to Widow Cass's. An' he said for me to tell you he'd pull through."

"Shot! Pull through!" repeated Helen in slow, unrealizing exclamation.

"Yes, shot," replied Carmichael fiercely. "An' whatever he says, I reckon he won't pull through."

"O heaven, how terrible!" burst out Helen. "He was so good—such a man! What a pity! Oh, he must have met that in my behalf. Tell me, what happened? Who shot him?"

"Wal, I don't know. An' that's what's made me hoppin' mad. I wasn't there when it come off. An' he won't tell me."

"Why not?"

"I don't know that, either. I reckoned first it was because he wanted to get even. But, after thinkin' it over, I guess he doesn't want me lookin' up anyone right now for fear I might get hurt. An' you're goin' to need your friends. That's all I can make of Roy."

Then Helen hurriedly related the event of Beasley's call on her that afternoon and all that had occurred.

"Wal, the half-breed son-of-a-greaser!" ejaculated Carmichael in utter confoundment. "He wanted you to marry him."

"He certainly did. I must say it was a—rather abrupt proposal."

"Miss Nell, I've shore felt in my bones that I'm the boy slated to brand that big bull."

"Oh, he must have shot Roy. He left here in a rage."

"I reckon you can coax it out of Roy. Fact is, all I could learn was that Roy come in the saloon alone. Beasley was there, an' Riggs—"

"Riggs!" interrupted Helen.

"Shore, Riggs. He come back again. But he'd better keep out of my way. An' Jeff Mulvey with his outfit. Turner told me he heard an argument an' then a shot. The gang cleared out, leavin' Roy on the floor. I come in a little later. Roy was still layin' there. Nobody was doin' anythin' for him. An' nobody had. I hold that against Turner. Wal, I got help an' packed Roy over to Widow Cass's. Roy seemed all right. But he

was too bright an' talky to suit me. The bullet hit his lung, that's shore. An' he lost a sight of blood before we stopped it. That skunk Turner might have lent a hand. An' if Roy croaks I reckon I'll—"

"Tom, why must you always be reckonin' to kill somebody?" demanded Helen angrily.

"'Cause somebody's got to be killed 'round here. That's why!" he snapped back.

"Even so—should you risk leaving Bo and me without a friend?" asked Helen reproachfully.

At that Carmichael wavered and lost something of his sullen deadliness.

"Aw, Miss Nell, I'm only mad. If you'll just be patient with me—an' mebbe coax me. But I can't see no other way out."

"Let's hope and pray," said Helen earnestly. "You spoke of my coaxing Roy to tell who shot him. When can I see him?"

"Tomorrow, I reckon. I'll come for you. Fetch Bo along with you. We've got to play safe from now on. An' what do you say to me an' Hal sleepin' here at the ranch house?"

"Indeed I'd feel safer," she replied. "There are rooms. Please come."

"All right. An' now I'll be goin' to fetch Hal. Shore wish I hadn't made you pale an' scared like this."

About ten o'clock next morning Carmichael drove Helen and Bo into Pine, and tied up the team before Widow Cass's cottage.

The peach and apple trees were mingling blossoms of pink and white; a drowsy hum of bees filled the fragrant air; rich, dark-green alfalfa covered the small orchard flat; a wood fire sent up a lazy column of blue smoke; and birds were singing sweetly.

Widow Cass appeared on the little porch, a gray, bent, worn, but cheerful old woman whom Helen had come to know as her friend.

"My land! I'm thet glad to see you, Miss Helen," she said, "An' you've fetched the little lass as I've not got acquainted with yet."

"Good morning, Mrs. Cass. How—how is Roy?" replied Helen, anxiously scanning the wrinkled face.

"Roy? Now don't you look so scared. Roy's most ready to git on his hoss an' ride home, if I let him. He knowed you was a-comin'. An' he made me hold a lookin'-glass for him to shave. How's thet fer a man with a bullet hole through him! You can't kill them Mormons, nohow."

She led them into a little sitting-room, where on a couch underneath a window Roy Beeman lay. He was wide awake and smiling, but haggard. He lay partly covered with a blanket. His gray shirt was open at the neck, disclosing bandages.

"Mornin'—girls," he drawled. "Shore is good of you now, comin' down."

Helen stood beside him, bent over him, in her earnestness, as she greeted him. She saw a shade of pain in his eyes and his immobility struck her, but he did not seem badly off. Bo was pale, round-eyed, and apparently too agitated to speak. Carmichael placed chairs beside the couch for the girls.

"Wal, what's ailin' you this nice mornin'?" asked Roy, eyes on the cowboy.

"Huh! Would you expect me to be wearin' the smile of a feller goin' to be married?" retorted Carmichael.

"Shore you haven't made up with Bo yet," returned Roy.

Bo blushed rosy red, and the cowboy's face lost some of its somber hue.

"I allow it's none of your d—darn bizness if she ain't made up with me," he said.

"Folks, I was jest a-goin' to say thet Roy's got fever an' he oughtn't t' talk too much," said the old woman. Then she and Carmichael went into the kitchen and closed the door.

Roy looked up at Helen with his keen eyes, more kindly piercing than ever.

"My brother John was here. He'd just left when you come. He rode home to tell my folks I'm not so bad hurt, an' then he's goin' to ride a beeline into the mountains."

Helen's eyes asked what her lips refused to utter.

"He's goin' after Dale. I sent him. I reckoned we-all sorta needed sight of thet doggone hunter."

"Can John—fetch Dale out—when the snow's so deep?" she asked unsteadily.

"Shore. He's takin' two hosses up to the snow line. Then, if necessary, he'll go over the pass on snowshoes. But I bet him Dale would ride out. Snow's about gone except on the north slopes an' on the peaks."

"Then—when may I—we expect to see Dale?"

"Three or four days, I reckon. I wish he was here now. Miss Helen, there's trouble afoot."

"I realize that. I'm ready. Did Las Vegas tell you about Beasley's visit to me?"

"No. You tell me," replied Roy.

Briefly Helen began to acquaint him with the circumstances of that visit, and before she had finished she made sure Roy was swearing to himself.

"He asked you to marry him! Jerusalem! Thet I'd never have reckoned. The—low-down coyote! Wal, Miss Helen, when I met up with Señor Beasley

last night he was shore spoilin' from somethin'; now I see what that was. An' I reckon I picked out the bad time."

"For what? Roy, what did you do?"

"Wal, I'd made up my mind awhile back to talk to Beasley the first chance I had. An' that was it. I was in the store when I seen him go into Turner's. So I followed. It was 'most dark. Beasley an' Riggs an' Mulvey an' some more were drinkin' an' powwowin'. So I just braced him right then."

"Roy! Oh, the way you boys court danger!"

"But, Miss Helen, that's the only way. To be afraid *makes* more danger. Beasley 'peared civil enough first off. Him an' me kept edgin' off, an' his pards kept edgin' after us, till we got over in a corner of the saloon. I don't know all I said to him. Shore I talked a heap. I told him what my old man thought. An' Beasley knowed as well as I that my old man's not only the oldest inhabitant hereabouts, but he's the wisest, too. An' he wouldn't tell a lie. Wal, I used all his sayin's in my argument to show Beasley that if he didn't haul up short he'd end almost as short."

"Beasley's thick-headed, an' powerful conceited. Vain as a peacock! He couldn't see, an' he got mad. I told him he was rich enough without robbin' you of your ranch, an'—wal, I shore put up a big talk for your side. By this time he an' his gang had me crowded in a corner, an' from their looks I begun to get cold feet. But I was in it an' had to make the best of it. The argument worked down to his pinnin' me to my word that I'd fight for you when that fight come off. An' I shore told him for my own sake I wished it'd come off quick. Then—wal—then somethin' did come off quick!"

"Roy, then he shot you!" exclaimed Helen passionately.

"Now, Miss Helen, I didn't say who done it," replied Roy with his engaging smile.

"Tell me, then—who did?"

"Wal, I reckon I shan't tell you unless you promise not to tell Las Vegas. That cowboy is plumb off his head. He thinks he knows who shot me an' I've been lyin' somethin' scandalous. You see, if he learns—then he'll go gunnin'. An', Miss Helen, that Texan is bad. He might get plugged as I did—an' there would be another man put off your side when the big trouble comes."

"Roy, I promise you I will not tell Las Vegas," replied Helen earnestly.

"Wal, then—it was Riggs!" Roy grew still paler as he confessed this and his voice, almost a whisper, expressed shame and hate. "That four-flush did it. Shot me from behind Beasley! I had no chance. I couldn't even see him draw. But when I fell an' lay there an' the others dropped back, then I seen the smokin' gun in his hand. He looked powerful important. An' Beasley began to cuss him an' was cussin' him as they all run out."

"Oh, coward! the despicable coward!" cried Helen.

"No wonder Tom wants to find out!" exclaimed Bo, low and deep. "I'll bet he suspects Riggs."

"Shore he does, but I wouldn't give him no satisfaction."

"Roy, you know that Riggs can't last out here."

"Wal, I hope he lasts till I get on my feet again."

"There you go! Hopeless, all you boys! You must spill blood!" murmured Helen shudderingly.

"Dear Miss Helen, don't take on so. I'm like Dale—no man to hunt up trouble

—an eye for an eye—a tooth for a tooth. I believe in God Almighty, an' killin' is against my religion, but Riggs shot me—the same as shootin' me in the back."

"Roy, I'm only a woman—I fear, faint-hearted and unequal to this West."

"Wait till somethin' happens to you. Supposin' Beasley comes an' grabs you with his own dirty big paws an', after maulin' you some, throws you out of your home! Or supposin' Riggs chases you into a corner!"

Helen felt the start of all her physical being—a violent leap of blood. But she could only judge of her looks from the grim smile of the wounded man as he watched her with his keen, intent eyes.

"My friend, anythin' can happen," he said. "But let's hope it won't be the worst."

He had begun to show signs of weakness, and Helen, rising at once, said that she and Bo had better leave him then, but would come to see him the next day. At her call Carmichael entered again with Mrs. Cass, and after a few remarks the visit was terminated. Carmichael lingered in the doorway.

"Wal, cheer up, you old Mormon!" he called.

"Cheer up yourself, you cross old bachelor!" retorted Roy, quite unnecessarily loud. "Can't you raise enough nerve to make up with Bo?"

Carmichael evacuated the doorway as if he had been spurred. He was quite red in the face while he unhitched the team, and silent during the ride up to the ranch house. There he got down and followed the girls into the sitting-room. He appeared still somber, though

not sullen, and had fully regained his composure.

"Did you find out who shot Roy?" he asked abruptly of Helen.

"Yes. But I promised Roy I would not tell," replied Helen nervously. She averted her eyes from his searching gaze, intuitively fearing his next query.

"Was it thet—Riggs?"

"Las Vegas, don't ask me. I will not break my promise."

He strode to the window and looked out a moment, and presently, when he turned toward Bo, he seemed a stronger, loftier, more impelling man, with all his emotions under control.

"Bo, will you listen to me—if I swear to speak the truth—as I know it?"

"Why, certainly," replied Bo with the color coming swiftly to her face.

"Roy doesn't want me to know because he wants to meet thet feller himself. An' I want to know because I want to stop him before he can do more dirt to us or our friends. Thet's Roy's reason an' mine. An' I'm askin' you to tell me."

"But, Tom—I oughtn't," replied Bo haltingly.

"Did you promise Roy not to tell?"

"No."

"Or your sister?"

"No. I didn't promise either."

"Wal, then you tell me. I want you to trust me in this here matter. But not because I love you an' once had a wild dream you might care a little for me—"

"Oh—Tom!" faltered Bo.

"Listen. I want you to trust me because I'm the one who knows what's best. I wouldn't lie an' I wouldn't say so if I didn't know shore. I swear Dale will back me up. But he can't be here for some days. An' thet gang has got

to be bluffed. You ought to see this. I reckon you've been quick in savvyin' Western ways. I couldn't pay you no higher compliment, Bo Rayner. Now will you tell me?"

"Tom, I'll tell you," whispered Bo. "It was a low-down, cowardly trick. Roy was surrounded—and shot from behind Beasley—by that four-flush Riggs!"

CHAPTER ELEVEN

Down From the Forest

MEMORY of a woman had ruined Milt Dale's peace, had confounded his philosophy of self-sufficient, lonely happiness in the solitude of the wilds, had forced him to come face to face with his soul and the fatal significance of life.

When he realized his defeat, that things were not as they seemed, that there was no joy for him in the coming of spring, that he had been blind in his free, sensual, Indian relation to existence, he fell into an inexplicably strange state, a despondency, a gloom as deep as the silence of his home.

Dale had not kept track of days and weeks. He did not know when the snow melted off three slopes of Paradise Park. All he knew was that an age had dragged over his head and that spring had come. During his restless waking hours, and even when he was asleep, there seemed always in the back of his mind a growing consciousness that soon he would emerge from this trial, a changed man, ready to sacrifice his chosen lot, to give up his lonely life of selfish indulgence in lazy affinity with nature, and to go wherever his

strong hands might perform some real service to people. Nevertheless, he wanted to linger in this mountain fastness until his ordeal was over—until he could meet her, and the world, knowing himself more of a man than ever before.

One bright morning, while he was at his campfire, the tame cougar gave a low, growling warning. Dale was startled. Tom did not act like that because of a prowling grizzly or a straying stag. Presently Dale espied a horseman riding slowly out of the straggling spruces. And with that sight Dale's heart gave a leap, recalling to him a divination of his future relation to his kind. Never had he been so glad to see a man!

This visitor resembled one of the Beemans, judging from the way he sat his horse, and presently Dale recognized him to be John.

At this juncture the jaded horse was spurred into a trot, soon reaching the pines and the camp.

"Howdy, there, you ole b'ar hunter!" called John, waving his hand.

For all his hearty greeting his appearance checked a like response from Dale. The horse was mud to his flanks and John was mud to his knees, wet, bedraggled, worn, and white. This hue of his face meant more than fatigue.

"Howdy, John?" replied Dale.

They shook hands. John wearily swung his leg over the pommel, but did not at once dismount. His clear gray eyes were wonderingly riveted upon the hunter.

"Milt—what'n hell's wrong?" he queried.

"Why?"

"Bust me if you ain't changed so I hardly knowed you. You've been sick—all alone here!"

"Do I look sick?"

"Wal, I should smile. Thin an' pale an' down in the mouth! Milt, what ails you?"

"I've gone to seed."

"You've gone off your head, jest as Roy said, livin' alone here. You overdid it, Milt. An' you look sick."

"John, my sickness is here," replied Dale soberly, as he laid a hand on his heart.

"I savvy. Had a hunch from Roy, anyhow."

"What kind of a hunch?"

"Easy now, Dale, ole man. Don't you reckon I'm ridin' in on you pretty early? Look at thet hoss!" John slid off and waved a hand at the drooping beast, then he began to unsaddle him. "Wal, he done great. We bogged some comin' over. An' I climbed the pass at night on the frozen snow."

"You're welcome as the flowers in May. John, what month is it?"

"By spades? are you as bad as thet? Let's see. It's the twenty-third of March."

"March! Well, I'm beat. I've lost my reckonin'—an' a lot more, maybe."

"Thar!" declared John, slapping the mustang. "You can't jest hang up here till my next trip. Milt, how're your hosses?"

"Wintered fine."

"Wal, thet's good. We'll need two big, strong hosses right off."

"What for?" queried Dale sharply. He dropped a stick of wood and straightened up from the campfire.

"You're goin' to ride down to Pine with me—thet's what for."

Familiarly then came back to Dale the quiet, intent suggestiveness of the Beemans in moments foreboding trial.

"Tell what you got to tell!" he broke out.

Quick as a flash the Mormon replied, "Roy's been shot. But he won't die. He sent for you. Bad deal's afoot. Beasley means to force Helen Rayner out an' steal her ranch."

Mounted on Dale's strongest horses, with only a light pack, an ax, and their weapons, the two men had reached the snow line on the pass by noon that day. Tom, the tame cougar, trotted along in the rear.

The crust of the snow, now half thawed by the sun, would not hold the weight of a horse, though it upheld the men on foot. They walked, leading the horses. Travel was not difficult until the snow began to deepen; then progress slackened materially. John had not been able to pick out the line of the trail, so Dale did not follow his tracks.

An old blaze on the trees enabled Dale to keep fairly well to the trail; and at length the height of the pass was reached, where the snow was deep. Here the horses labored, plowing through foot by foot. When, finally, they sank to their flanks, they had to be dragged and goaded on, and helped by thick flat bunches of spruce boughs placed under their hoofs. It took three hours of breaking toil to do the few hundred yards of deep snow on the height of the pass. The cougar did not have great difficulty in following, though it was evident he did not like such traveling.

That behind them, the horses gathered heart and worked on to the edge of the steep descent, where they had all they could do to hold back from sliding and rolling. Fast time was made on this slope, at the bottom of which began a dense forest with snow still deep in places and windfalls hard to locate.

The men here performed Herculean labors, but they got through to a park where the snow was gone. The ground, however, soft and boggy, was in places more treacherous than the snow; and the travelers had to skirt the edge of the park to a point opposite, and then go on through the forest. When they reached bare and solid ground, just before dark that night, it was high time, for the horses were ready to drop, and the men likewise.

Camp was made in an open wood. Darkness fell and the men were resting on bough beds, feet to the fire, with Tom curled up close by, and the horses still drooping where they had been unsaddled. Morning, however, discovered them grazing on the long, bleached grass. John shook his head when he looked at them.

"You reckoned to make Pine by nightfall. How far is it—the way you'll go?"

"Fifty mile or thereabouts," replied Dale.

"Wal, we can't ride it on them critters."

"John, we'd do more than that if we had to."

They were saddled and on the move before sunrise, leaving snow and bog behind. Level parks and level forests led one after another to long slopes and steep descents, all growing sunnier and greener as the altitude diminished. Squirrels and grouse, turkeys and deer, and less tame denizens of the forest grew more abundant as the travel advanced. In this game zone, however, Dale had trouble with Tom. The cougar had to be watched and called often to keep him off of trails.

"Tom doesn't like a long trip," said Dale. "But I'm goin' to take him. Some way or other he may come in handy."

The men talked but little. Dale led the way, with Tom trotting noiselessly beside his horse. John followed close behind. They loped the horses across parks, trotted through the forests, walked slowly up what few inclines they met, and slid down the soft, wet, pine-matted descents. So they averaged from six to eight miles an hour. The horses held up well under that steady travel, and this without any rest at noon.

Dale seemed to feel himself in an emotional trance. Yet, despite this, the same old sensorial perceptions crowded thick and fast upon him, strangely sweet and vivid after the past dead months when neither sun nor wind nor cloud nor scent of pine nor anything in nature could stir him. His mind, his heart, his soul seemed steeped in an intoxicating wine of expectation, while his eyes and ears and nose had never been keener to register the facts of the forestland.

He saw the black thing far ahead that resembled a burned stump, but he knew it was a bear before it vanished; he saw gray flash of deer and wolf and coyote, and the red of fox, and the small, wary heads of old gobblers just sticking above the grass; and he saw deep tracks of game as well as the slow-rising blades of bluebells where some soft-footed beast had just trod. And he heard the melancholy notes of birds, the twitter of grouse, the sigh of the wind, the light dropping of pine cones, the near and distant bark of squirrels, the deep gobble of a turkey close at hand and the challenge from a rival far away, the cracking of twigs in the thickets, the murmur of running water, the scream of an eagle and the shrill cry of a hawk, and always the soft, dull, steady pads of the hoofs of the horses.

"I smell smoke," said Dale suddenly, as he reined in, and turned for corroboration from his companion.

John sniffed the warm air. "Wal, you're more of an Injun than me," he replied, shaking his head.

They traveled on, and presently came out upon the rim of the last slope. A long league of green slanted below them, breaking up into straggling lines of trees and groves that joined the cedars, and these in turn stretched on and down in gray-black patches to the desert, that glittering and bare, with streaks of somber hue, faded in the obscurity of distance.

The village of Pine appeared to nestle in a curve of the edge of the great forest, and the cabins looked like tiny white dots set in green.

"Look there," said Dale, pointing.

Some miles to the right a gray escarpment of rock cropped out of the slope, forming a promontory; and from it a thin, pale column of smoke curled upward to be lost from sight as soon as it had no background of green.

"Thet's your smoke, shore enough," replied John thoughtfully. "Now, I jest wonder who's campin' there. No water near or grass for hosses."

"John, that point's been used for smoke signals many a time."

"Was jest thinkin' of thet same. Shall we ride around there an' take a peck?"

"No. But we'll remember that. If Beasley's got his deep scheme goin', he'll have Snake Anson's gang somewhere close."

"Roy said thet same. Wal, it's some three hours till sundown. The hosses keep up. I reckon I'm fooled, for we'll make Pine all right. But old Tom there, he's tired or lazy."

The big cougar was lying down,

panting, and his half-shut eyes were on Dale.

"Tom's only lazy an' fat. He could travel at this gait for a week. But let's rest a half hour an' watch that smoke before movin' on. We can make Pine before sundown."

When travel had been resumed, half-way down the slope Dale's sharp eyes caught a broad track where shod horses had passed, climbing in a long slant toward the promontory. He dismounted to examine it, and John, coming up, proceeded with alacrity to get off and do likewise. Dale made his deductions, after which he stood in a brown study beside his horse, waiting for John.

"Wal, what'd you make of these here tracks?" asked the Mormon.

"Some horses an' a pony went along here yesterday, an' today a single horse made that fresh track."

"Wal, Milt, for a hunter you ain't so bad at hoss tracks," observed John. "But how many hosses went yesterday?"

"I couldn't make out—several—maybe four or five."

"Six hosses an' a colt or little mustang, unshod, to be strict correct. Wal, supposin' they did. What's it mean to us?"

"I don't know as I'd thought anythin' unusual, if it hadn't been for that smoke we saw off the rim, an' then this here fresh track made along today. Looks queer to me."

"Wish Roy was here," replied John, scratching his head. "Milt, I've a hunch, if he was, he'd foller them tracks."

"Maybe. But we haven't time for that. We can backtrail them, though, if they keep clear as they are here. An' we'll not lose any time, either."

That broad track led straight toward

Pine, down to the edge of the cedars, where, amid some jagged rocks, evidences showed that men had camped there for days. Here it ended as a broad trail. But from the north came the single fresh track made that very day, and from the east, more in a line with Pine, came two tracks made the day before. And these were imprints of big and little hoofs. Manifestly these interested John more than they did Dale, who had to wait for his companion.

"Milt, it ain't a colt's—thet little track," avowed John.

"Why not—an' what if it isn't?" queried Dale.

"Wal, it ain't, because a colt always straggles back, an' from one side to t'other. This little track keeps close to the big one. An' by George! it was made by a led mustang."

John resembled Roy Beeman then with that leaping, intent fire in his gray eyes. Dale's reply was to spur his horse into a trot and call sharply to the lagging cougar.

When they turned into the broad, blossom-bordered road that was the only thoroughfare of Pine the sun was setting red and gold behind the mountains. The horses were too tired for any more than a walk. Natives of the village, catching sight of Dale and Beeman, and the huge gray cat following like a dog, called excitedly to one another. A group of men in front of Turner's gazed intently down the road, and soon manifested signs of excitement.

Dale and his comrade dismounted in front of Widow Cass's cottage. Dale called as he strode up the little path. Mrs. Cass came out. She was white and shaking, but appeared calm. At sight of her John Beeman drew a sharp breath.

"Wal, now—" he began hoarsely, and left off.

"How's Roy?" queried Dale.

"Lord knows I'm glad to see you boys! Milt, you're thin an' strange-lookin'. Roy's had a little setback. He got a shock today an' it throwed him off. Fever—an' now he's out of his head. It won't do no good for you to waste time seein' him. Take my word for it he's all right. But there's others as— For the land's sakes, Milt Dale, you fetched thet cougar back! Don't let him near me!"

"Tom won't hurt you, mother," said Dale, as the cougar came padding up the path. "You were sayin' somethin'—about others. Is Miss Helen safe? Hurry!"

"Ride up to see her—an' waste no more time here."

The ride up to Auchincloss's ranch house seemed endless to Dale. Natives came out in the road to watch after he had passed. Stern as Dale was in dominating his feelings, he could not wholly subordinate his mounting joy to a waiting terrible anticipation of catastrophe. But no matter what awaited—nor what fateful events might hinge upon this nameless circumstance about to be disclosed, the wonderful and glorious fact of the present was that in a moment he would see Helen Rayner.

There were saddled horses in the courtyard, but no riders. A Mexican boy sat on the porch bench, in the seat where Dale remembered he had encountered Al Auchincloss. The door of the big sitting-room was open. The scent of flowers, the murmur of bees, the pounding of hoofs came vaguely to Dale. His eyes dimmed, so that the ground, when he slid out of his saddle, seemed far below him.

He stepped upon the porch. His sight suddenly cleared. A tight fullness at his throat made incoherent the words he said to the Mexican boy. But they were understood, as the boy ran back around the house. Dale knocked sharply and stepped over the threshold.

Then Dale heard a voice in another room, a step, a creak of the door. It opened. A woman in white appeared. He recognized Helen. But instead of the rich brown bloom and dark-eyed beauty so hauntingly limned on his memory, he saw a white, beautiful face, strained and quivering in anguish, and eyes that pierced his heart. He could not speak.

"Oh! my friend—you've come!" she whispered.

Dale put out a shaking hand. But she did not see it. She clutched his shoulders, as if to feel whether or not he was real, and then her arms went up around his neck.

"Oh, thank God! I knew you would come!" she said, and her head sank to his shoulder.

Dale divined what he had suspected. Helen's sister had been carried off. Yet, while his quick mind grasped Helen's broken spirit—the unbalance that was reason for this marvelous and glorious act—he did not take other meaning of the embrace to himself. He just stood there, transported, making sure with all his keen senses, so that he could feel forever, how she was clinging round his neck, her face over his bursting heart, her quivering form close pressed to his.

"It's—Bo," he said unsteadily.

"She went riding yesterday—and—never—came—back!" replied Helen brokenly.

"I've seen her trail. She's been taken

into the woods. I'll find her. I'll fetch her back," he replied rapidly.

With a shock she seemed to absorb his meaning. With another shock she raised her face—leaned back a little to look at him.

"You'll find her—fetch her back?"

"Yes," he answered instantly.

With that ringing word it seemed to Dale she realized how she was standing. He felt her shake as she dropped her arms and stepped back, while the white anguish of her face was flooded out by a wave of scarlet. But she was brave in her confusion. Her eyes never fell, though they changed swiftly, darkening with shame, amazement, and with feelings he could not read.

"I'm almost—out of my head," she faltered.

"No wonder. I saw that—But now you must get clear-headed. I've no time to lose."

He led her to the door. "John, it's Bo that's gone," he called. "Since yesterday. Send the boy to get me a bag of meat an' bread. You run to the corral an' get me a fresh horse. My old horse Ranger if you can find him quick. An' rustle."

Without a word John leaped bareback on one of the horses he had just unsaddled and spurred him across the courtyard.

Then the big cougar, seeing Helen, got up from where he lay on the porch and came to her.

"Oh, it's Tom!" cried Helen, and as he rubbed against her knees she patted his head with trembling hand. "You big, beautiful pet! Oh, how I remember! Oh, how Bo would love to—"

"Where's Carmichael?" interrupted Dale. "Out huntin' Bo?"

"Yes. It was he who missed her first. He rode everywhere yesterday. Last

night when he came back he was wild. I've not seen him today. He made all the other men but Hal and Joe stay home on the ranch."

"Right. An' John must stay, too," declared Dale. "But it's strange. Carmichael ought to have found the girl's tracks. She was ridin' a pony?"

"Bo rode Sam. He's a little bronc, very strong and fast."

"I come across his tracks. How'd Carmichael miss them?"

"He didn't. He found them—trailed them all along the north range. That's where he forbade Bo to go. You see, they're in love with each other. They've been at odds. Neither will give in. Bo disobeyed him. There's hard ground off the north range, so he said. He was able to follow her tracks only so far."

"Were there any other tracks along with hers?"

"No."

"Miss Helen, I found them 'way southeast of Pine. Up on the slope of the mountain. There were seven other horses makin' that trail—when we run across it. On the way down we found a camp where men had waited. An' Bo's pony, led by a rider on a big horse, come into that camp from the east—maybe north a little. An' that tells the story."

"Riggs ran her down—made off with her!" cried Helen passionately. "Oh, the villain! He had men in waiting. That's Beasley's work. They were after me."

"It may not be just what you said, but that's close enough. An' Bo's in a bad fix. You must face that an' try to bear up under—fears of the worst."

"My friend! You will save her!"

"I'll fetch her back, alive or dead."

"Dead! Oh, my God!" Helen cried, and closed her eyes an instant, to open

them burning black. "But Bo isn't dead. I know that—I feel it. She's a little savage. She has no fear. She'd fight like a tigress for her life. She's strong. You remember how strong. She can stand anything. Unless they murder her outright she'll live—a long time—through any ordeal. So I beg you, my friend, don't lose an hour—don't ever give up!"

CHAPTER TWELVE

"Are You from Texas?"

YOUNG Burt possessed the keenest eyes of any man in Snake Anson's gang, for which reason he was given the post as lookout from the lofty promontory. His instructions were to keep sharp watch over the open slopes below and to report any sight of a horse.

A cedar fire with green boughs on top of dead wood sent up a long, pale column of smoke. This signal fire had been kept burning since sunrise.

The preceding night camp had been made on a level spot in the cedars back of the promontory. But manifestly Anson did not expect to remain there long. For, after breakfast, the packs had been made up and the horses stood saddled and bridled. They were restless and uneasy, tossing bits and fighting flies. The sun, now halfway to meridian, was hot and no breeze blew in that sheltered spot.

Shady Jones had ridden off early to fill the water bags, and had not yet returned. Anson, thinner and scallier and more snakelike than ever, was dealing a greasy, dirty deck of cards, his opponent being the square-shaped, black-

visaged Moze. In lieu of money the gamblers wagered with cedar berries, each of which berries represented a pipeful of tobacco.

Jim Wilson brooded under a cedar tree, his unshaven face a dirty dust-hue, a smoldering fire in his light eyes, a sullen set to his jaw. Every little while he would raise his eyes to glance at Riggs, and it seemed that a quick glance was enough. Riggs paced to and fro in the open, coatless and hatless, his black-broadcloth trousers and embroidered vest dusty and torn. An enormous gun bumped awkwardly in its sheath swinging below his hip.

Riggs looked perturbed. His face was sweating freely, yet it was far from red in color. He did not appear to mind the sun or the flies. His eyes were staring, dark, wild, shifting in gaze from everything they encountered. But often that gaze shot back to the captive girl sitting under a cedar some yards from the man.

Bo Rayner's little, booted feet were tied together with one end of a lasso and the other end trailed off over the ground. Her hands were free. Her riding-habit was dusty and disordered. Her eyes blazed defiantly out of a small, pale face.

"Harve Riggs, I wouldn't be standing in those cheap boots of yours for a million dollars," she said sarcastically.

Riggs took no notice of her words.

"You pack that gun sheath wrong end out. What have you got the gun for, anyhow?" she added tauntingly.

Snake Anson let out a hoarse laugh and Moze's black visage opened in a huge grin. Jim Wilson seemed to drink in the girl's words. Sullen and somber, he bent his lean head, very still, as if listening.

"You'd better shut up," said Riggs darkly.

"I will not shut up," declared Bo.

"Then I'll gag you," he threatened.

"Gag me! Why, you dirty, low-down, two-bit bluff!" she exclaimed hotly, "I'd like to see you try it. I'll tear that long hair of yours right off your head."

Riggs advanced toward her with his hands clutching, as if eager to throttle her. The girl leaned forward, her face reddening, her eyes fierce.

"You damned little cat!" muttered Riggs thickly. "I'll gag you—if you don't stop squallin'."

"Come on. I dare you to lay a hand on me! Harve Riggs, I'm not the least afraid of you. Can't you savvy that? You're a liar, a four-flush, a sneak! Why, you're not fit to wipe the feet of any of these outlaws."

Riggs took two long strides and bent over her, his teeth exposed in a snarl, and cuffed her hard on the side of the head.

Bo's head jerked back with the force of the blow, but she uttered no cry.

Her face then, with its dead whiteness and the eyes of flame, held a tragic, impelling beauty that stung Anson into remonstrance.

"Aw, Riggs, don't beat up the kid," he protested. "Thet won't do any good. Let her alone."

"But she's got to shut up," replied Riggs.

"How'n hell air you goin' to shet her up? Mebbe if you get out of her sight she'll be quiet. How about thet, girl?" Anson gnawed his drooping mustache as he eyed Bo.

"Have I made any kick to you or your men yet?" she queried.

"It strikes me you ain't," replied Anson.

"You won't hear me make any se

long as I'm treated decent," said Bo. "I don't know what you've got to do with Riggs. He ran me down—roped me—dragged me to your camp. Now I've a hunch you're waiting for Beasley."

"Girl, your hunch's correct," said Anson.

"Well, do you know I'm the wrong girl?"

"What's that? I reckon you're Nell Rayner, who got left all old Auchincloss's property."

"No. I'm Bo Rayner. Nell is my sister. She owns the ranch. Beasley wanted her."

Anson cursed deep and low. Under his sharp, bristling eyebrows he bent cunning green eyes upon Riggs.

"Say, you! Is what this kid says so?"

"Yes. She's Nell Rayner's sister," replied Riggs doggedly.

"A-huh. Wal, why in the hell did you drag her into my camp an' off up here to signal Beasley? He ain't wantin' her. He wants the girl who owns the ranch."

"Anson, I fetched her because I know Nell Rayner will give up anythin' on earth for her," Riggs said in a loud voice.

"Don't you believe him," declared Bo Rayner bluntly. "He's a liar. He's double-crossing Beasley and all of you."

Riggs raised a shaking hand to clench it at her. "Keep still or it'll be the worse for you."

"Riggs, shut up yourself," put in Anson, as he leisurely rose. "Mebbe it ain't occurred to you that she might have some talk interestin' to me. An' I'm runnin' this hyar camp. Now, kid, talk up an' say what you like."

"I said he was double-crossing you all," replied the girl instantly. "Whatever he has said to Beasley or you, it's a dead sure bet he's playing his own

game. That's to get hold of Nell, and if not her—then me! Oh, I'm out of breath—and I'm out of names to call him. If I talked forever—I'd never be—able to—do him justice."

Suddenly the crack of iron-shod hoofs on stone broke the silence that followed Bo's outburst. In another moment a rangy bay horse trotted out of the cedars, up to the camp, and his rider jumped off nimbly for so heavy a man.

"Howdy, Beasley?" was Anson's greeting.

"Hello, Snake, old man!" replied Beasley as his bold, snapping black eyes swept the group. He was dusty and hot, and wet with sweat, yet evidently too excited to feel discomfort. "I seen your smoke signal first off an' jumped my hoss quick. But I rode north of Pine before I headed 'round this way. Did you corral the girl or did Riggs? Say!—you look queer! What's wrong here? You haven't signaled me for nothin'?"

Snake Anson beckoned to Bo. "Come out of the shade. Let him look you over."

The girl walked out from under the spreading cedar that had hidden her from sight.

Beasley stared aghast—his jaw dropped. "That's the kid sister of the woman I wanted!" he ejaculated.

"So we've jest been told."

Astonishment still held Beasley. "Told?" he echoed. Suddenly his big body leaped with a start. "Who got her? Who fetched her?"

"Why, Mister Gunman Riggs hyar," replied Anson with scorn.

"Riggs, you got the wrong girl," shouted Beasley. "You made that mistake once before. What're you up to?"

"I chased her an' when I got her,

seein' it wasn't Nell Rayner—why—I kept her, anyhow," replied Riggs. "An' I've got a word for your ear alone."

"Man, you're crazy—queerin' my deal that way!" roared Beasley. "You heard my plans—Riggs, this girl-stealin' can't be done twice. Was you drinkin' or locoed or what?"

"Beasley, he was giving you the double cross," cut in Bo Rayner's cool voice.

The rancher stared speechlessly at her, then at Anson, then at Wilson, and last at Riggs, when his brown visage shaded dark with rush of purple blood. With one lunge he knocked Riggs flat, then stood over him with a convulsive hand at his gun.

"You white-livered card sharp! I've a notion to bore you. They told me you had a deal of your own, an' now I believe it."

"Yes—I had," replied Riggs, cautiously getting up. He was ghastly. "But I wasn't double-crossin' you. Your deal was to get the girl away from home so you could take possession of her property. An' I wanted her."

"What for did you fetch the sister, then?" demanded Beasley, his big jaw bulging.

"Because I've a plan to—"

"Plan hell! You've spoiled my plan an' I've seen about enough of you."

"Beasley, tell them to get my horse. I want to go home," said Bo Rayner.

"I had nothin' to do with fetchin' you here an' I'll have nothin' to do with sendin' you back or whatever's done with you," declared Beasley.

Then the girl's face flashed white again and her eyes changed to fire.

"You're as big a liar as Riggs," she cried passionately. "And you're a thief, a bully who picks on defenseless girls! Oh, we know your game! Milt Dale

heard your plot with this outlaw Anson to steal my sister. You ought to be hanged—you low-down skunk!"

"I'll cut out your tongue!" hissed Beasley.

"Yes, I'll bet you would, if you had me alone. But these outlaws—these sheep thieves—these tools you hire are better than you and Riggs. What do you suppose Carmichael will do to you? Carmichael! He's my sweetheart—that cowboy. You know what he did to Riggs. Have you brains enough to know what he'll do to you?"

"He'll not do much," growled Beasley. But the thick purplish blood was receding from his face. "Your cow-puncher—"

"Bah!" she interrupted, and she snapped her fingers in his face. "He's from Texas! He's from *Texas*!"

"Supposin' he is from Texas?" demanded Beasley in angry irritation. "What's that? Texans are all over. There's Jim Wilson, Snake Anson's right-hand man. He's from Texas. But that ain't scarin' anyone."

He pointed toward Wilson, who shifted uneasily from foot to foot. The girl's flaming glance followed his hand.

"Are you from Texas?" she asked.

"Yes, Miss, I am—an' I reckon I don't deserve it," replied Wilson. A vague shame seemed to attend his confession.

"Oh! I believed even a bandit from Texas would fight for a helpless girl!" she replied in withering scorn.

Jim Wilson dropped his head. If anyone there suspected a serious turn to Wilson's attitude toward that situation it was the keen outlaw leader.

"Beasley, you're courtin' death," he broke in.

"You bet you are!" added Bo with a passion that made her listeners quiver. "You've put me at the mercy of a gang

of outlaws! You may force my sister out of her home! But your day will come! Tom Carmichael will *kill* you."

Beasley mounted his horse. Sullen, livid, furious, he sat shaking in the saddle, to glare down at the outlaw leader.

"Snake, that's no fault of mine the deal's miscarried. I was square. I made my offer for the workin' out of my plan. It ain't been done. Now there's hell to pay an' I'm through."

"Beasley, I reckon I couldn't hold you to anythin'," replied Anson slowly. "But if you was square you ain't square now. We've hung around an' tried hard. My men are all sore. An' we're broke, with no outfit to speak of. Me an' you never fell out before. But I reckon we might."

"Do I owe you any money—accordin' to the deal?" demanded Beasley.

"No, you don't," responded Anson sharply.

"Then that's square. I wash my hands of the whole deal. Make Riggs pay up. He's got money an' he's got plans. Go in with him."

With that Beasley spurred his horse, wheeled and rode away. The outlaws gazed after him until he disappeared in the cedars.

"What'd you expect from a greaser?" queried Shady Jones.

"Anson, didn't I say so?" added Burt.

The black-visaged Moze rolled his eyes like a mad bull and Jim Wilson studiously examined a stick he held in his hands. Riggs showed immense relief.

"Anson, stake me to some of your outfit an' I'll ride off with the girl," he said eagerly.

"You're no woodsman. An' unless you're plumb locoed you'd never risk goin' near Pine or Show Down. There'll be real trackers huntin' your trail."

The listening girl suddenly appealed to Wilson. "Don't let him take me off—alone—in the woods!" she faltered.

Jim Wilson broke into gruff reply. "I'm not bossin' this gang."

"But you're a man!" she importuned.

"Riggs, you fetch along your precious firebrand an' come with us," said Anson craftily. "I'm particular curious to see her brand you."

"Snake, lemme take the girl back to Pine," said Jim Wilson.

Anson swore his amazement.

"It's sense," continued Wilson. "We've shore got our own troubles, an' keepin' her'll only add to them. I've a hunch. Now you know I ain't often givin' to buckin' your say-so. But this deal ain't tastin' good to me. Thet girl ought to be sent home."

"But mebbe there's somethin' in it for us. Her sister'd pay to git her back."

"Wal, I shore hope you'll recollect I offered—thet's all," concluded Wilson.

"Jim, if we wanted to git rid of her we'd let Riggs take her off," remonstrated the outlaw leader. He was perturbed and undecided. Wilson worried him.

The long Texan veered around full faced. What subtle transformation in him!

"Like hell we would!" he said.

It could not have been the tone that caused Anson to quail. He might have been leader here, but he was not the stronger man. His face clouded.

"Break camp," he ordered.

Riggs had probably not heard that last exchange between Anson and Wilson, for he had walked a few rods aside to get his horse.

In a few moments when they started off, Burt, Jones, and Moze were in the lead driving the pack horses, An-



son rode next, the girl came between him and Riggs, and significantly, it seemed, Jim Wilson brought up the rear.

This start was made a little after the noon hour. They zigzagged up the slope, took to a deep ravine, and followed it up to where it headed in the level forest. From there travel was rapid, the pack horses being driven at a jog-trot. Once when a troop of deer burst out of a thicket into a glade, to stand with ears high, young Burt halted the cavalcade. His well-aimed shot brought down a deer.

Then the men rode on, leaving him behind to dress and pack the meat. The only other halt made was at the crossing of the first water, a clear, swift brook, where both horses and men drank thirstily. Here Burt caught up with his comrades.

They traversed glade and park, and wended a crooked trail through the deepening forest, and climbed, bench after bench, to higher ground, while the sun sloped to the westward, lower and redder. Sunset had gone, and twilight was momentarily brightening to the afterglow when Anson, breaking his silence of the afternoon, ordered a halt.

The place was wild, dismal, a shallow vale between dark slopes of spruce. Grass, firewood, and water were there

in abundance. All the men were off, throwing saddles and packs, before the tired girl made an effort to get down. Riggs, observing her, made a not ungentle move to pull her off. She gave him a resounding slap with her gloved hand.

"Keep your paws to yourself," she said. No evidence of exhaustion was there in her spirit.

Wilson had observed this byplay, but Anson had not.

"What come off?" he asked.

"Wal, the Honorable Gunman Riggs jest got caressed by the lady—as he was doin' the elegant," replied Moze, who stood nearest.

"Jim, was you watchin'?" queried Anson. His curiosity had held through the afternoon.

"He tried to yank her off an' she biffed him," replied Wilson.

"That Riggs is jest daffy or plain locoed," said Snake in an aside to Moze.

"Boss, you mean plain cussed. Mark my words, he'll hoodoo this outfit. Jim was figgerin' correct."

"Hoodoo—" Anson cursed under his breath.

Many hands made quick work. In a few moments a fire was burning brightly, water was boiling, pots were steaming, the odor of venison permeated the cool air. The girl had at last slipped off her saddle to the ground, where she sat while Riggs led the horse away. She sat there apparently forgotten, a pathetic droop to her head.

Wilson had taken an ax and was vigorously wielding it among the spruces. One by one they fell with swish and soft crash. Then the sliding ring of the ax told how he was slicing off the branches with long sweeps. Presently he appeared in the semi-darkness, dragging half-trimmed spruces.

He made several trips, the last of which was to stagger under a huge burden of spruce boughs. These he spread under a low, projecting branch of an aspen. Then he leaned the bushy spruces slantingly against this branch on both sides, quickly improvising a V-shaped shelter with narrow aperture in front. Next from one of the packs he took a blanket and threw that inside the shelter. Then, touching the girl on the shoulder, he whispered:

"When you're ready, slip in there. An' don't lose no sleep by worryin', fer I'll be layin' right here."

He made a motion to indicate his length across the front of the narrow aperture.

"Oh, thank you! Maybe you really are a Texan," she whispered back.

"Mebbe," was his gloomy reply.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

"Dodge This Bullet!"

ANSON'S gang did not bestir themselves at the usual early sunrise hour common to all woodsmen, hunters, or outlaws, to whom the break of day was welcome. These companions—Anson and Riggs included—might have hated to see the dawn come. It meant only another meager meal, then the weary packing and the long, long ride to nowhere in particular, and another meager meal—all toiled for without even the necessities of satisfactory living, and assuredly without the thrilling hopes that made their life significant, and certainly with a growing sense of approaching calamity.

The outlaw leader rose surly and

cross-grained. He had to boot Burt to drive him out for the horses. Riggs followed him. Shady Jones did nothing except grumble. Wilson, by common consent, always made the sourdough bread, and he was slow about it this morning. Anson and Moze did the rest of the work without alacrity. The girl did not appear.

"Is she dead?" growled Anson.

"No, she ain't," replied Wilson, looking up. "She's sleepin'. Let her sleep. She'd shore be a sight better off if she was daid."

"A-huh! So would all of this hyar outfit," was Anson's response.

"Wal, Sna-ake, I shore reckon we'll all be thet there soon," drawled Wilson in his familiar cool and irritating tone that said so much more than the content of the words.

Burt rode bareback into camp, driving half the number of the horses; Riggs followed shortly with several more. But three were missed, one of them being Anson's favorite. He would not have budged without that horse. During breakfast he growled about his lazy men, and after the meal tried to urge them off. Riggs went unwillingly. Burt refused to go at all.

"Nix. I footed them hills all I'm a-goin' to," he said. "An' from now on I rustle my own hoss."

The leader glared his reception of this opposition. Perhaps his sense of fairness actuated him once more, for he ordered Shady and Moze out to do their share.

"Jim, you're the best tracker in this outfit. Suppose you go," suggested Anson. "You allus used to be the first one off."

"Times has changed, Snake," was the imperturbable reply.

"Wal, won't you go?" demanded the leader impatiently.

"I shore won't."

Wilson did not look or intimate in any way that he would not leave the girl in camp with one or any or all of Anson's gang, but the truth was as significant as if he had shouted it. The slow-thinking Moze gave Wilson a sinister look.

"Boss, ain't it funny how a pretty wench—" began Shady Jones sarcastically.

"Shut up, you fool!" broke in Anson. "Come on, I'll help rustle them hosses."

After they had gone Burt took his rifle and strolled off into the forest. Then the girl appeared. Her hair was down, her face pale, with dark shadows. She asked for water to wash her face. Wilson pointed to the brook, and as she walked slowly toward it he took a comb and a clean scarf from his pack and carried them to her.

Upon her return to the campfire she looked very different with her hair arranged and the red back in her cheeks.

"Miss, air you hungry?" asked Wilson.

"Yes, I am," she replied.

He helped her to portions of bread, venison, and gravy, and a cup of coffee. Evidently she relished the meat, but she had to force down the rest.

"Where are they all?" she asked.

"Rustlin' the hosses."

Probably she divined that he did not want to talk, for the fleeting glance she gave him attested to a thought that his voice or demeanor had changed. Presently she sought a seat under the aspen tree, out of the sun, and the smoke continually blowing in her face; and there she stayed, a forlorn little figure, for all the resolute lips and defiant eyes.

The Texan paced to and fro beside the campfire with bent head, and hands locked behind him. But for the swinging gun he would have resembled a lanky farmer, coatless and hatless, with his brown vest open, his trousers stuck in the top of the high boots.

And neither he nor the girl changed their positions relatively for a long time. At length, however, after peering into the woods, and listening, he remarked to the girl that he would be back in a moment, and then walked off around the spruces.

No sooner had he disappeared—in fact, so quickly afterward that it presupposed design instead of accident—than Riggs came running from the opposite side of the glade. He ran straight to the girl, who sprang to her feet.

"I hid—two of the—horses," he panted, husky with excitement. "I'll take—two saddles. You grab some grub. We'll run for it."

"No," she cried, stepping back.

"But it's not safe—for us—here," he said hurriedly, glancing all around. "I'll take you—home. I swear. Not safe—I tell you—this gang's after me. Hurry!"

"I'm safer—here with this outlaw gang," she replied.

"You won't come!" His color began to lighten then, and his face to distort. He dropped his hold on the saddles.

"Harve Riggs, I'd rather become a toy and a rag for these ruffians than spend an hour alone with you," she flashed at him in unquenchable hate.

"I'll drag you!"

He seized her, but could not hold her. Breaking away she screamed.

"Help!"

That whitened his face, drove him to frenzy. Leaping forward, he struck her a hard blow across the mouth. It stag-

gered her, and, tripping on a saddle, she fell. His hands flew to her throat, ready to choke her. But she lay still and held her tongue. Then he dragged her to her feet.

The girl's eyes dilated. They looked beyond him. Her lips opened.

"Scream again an' I'll kill you!" he cried hoarsely and swiftly. The very opening of her lips had terrified Riggs.

"Reckon one scream was enough," spoke a voice, slow, but without the drawl, easy and cool, yet incalculable in some terrible sense.

Riggs wheeled with an inarticulate cry. Wilson stood a few paces off, with his gun half leveled, low down. His face seemed as usual, only his eyes held a quivering, light intensity, like boiling molten silver.

"Girl, what made that blood on your mouth?"

"Riggs hit me!" she whispered. Then at something she feared or saw or divined she shrank back, dropped on her knees, and crawled into the spruce shelter.

"Wal, Riggs, I'd invite you to draw if that'd be any use," said Wilson. This speech was reflective, yet it hurried a little.

Riggs could not draw nor move nor speak. He seemed turned to stone, except his jaw, which slowly fell.

"Harve Riggs, gunman from down Missouri way," continued the outlaw's terrible voice, "reckon you've looked into a heap of gun barrels in your day. Shore! Wal, look in this heah one!"

Wilson deliberately leveled the gun on a line with Riggs's starting eyes.

"Wasn't you heard to brag in Turner's saloon—that you could see lead comin'—an' dodge it? Shore you must be swift! Dodge this heah bullet!"

The gun spouted flame and boomed.

One of Riggs's starting, popping eyes—the right one—went out, like a lamp. The other rolled horribly, then set in blank dead fixedness. Riggs swayed in slow motion until a lost balance felled him heavily, an inert mass.

Wilson bent over the prostrate form. Strange, violent contrast to the cool scorn of the preceding moment! Hissing, spitting, as if poisoned by passion, he burst with the hate that his character had forbidden him to express on a living counterfeit. Wilson was shaken, as if by a palsy. He choked over passionate, incoherent invective. It was the hate of real manhood for a craven, then the hate of disgrace for a murder. No man so fair as a gun fighter in the Western creed of an "even break"!

Wilson's terrible cataclysm of passion passed. Straightening up, he sheathed his weapon and began a slow pace before the fire. Not many moments afterward he jerked his head high and listened. Horses were softly thudding through the forest. Soon Anson rode into sight with his men and one of the strayed horses. It chanced, too, that young Burt appeared on the other side of the glade. He walked quickly, as one who anticipated news.

Snake Anson as he dismounted espied the dead man. "Jim—I thought I heard a shot."

The others exclaimed and leaped off their horses to view the prostrate form with that curiosity and strange fear common to all men confronted by sight of sudden death.

That emotion was only momentary.

"Shot his lamp out!" ejaculated Moze.

"Wonder how Gunman Riggs liked that plumb-center peg!" exclaimed Shady Jones with a hard laugh.

"Back of his head all gone!" gasped young Burt.

"Jim!—the long-haired fool didn't try to draw on you!" exclaimed Snake Anson, astounded.

"He hit the gurl," replied Wilson.

Then there were long-drawn exclamations all around, and glance met glance.

"Jim, you saved me the job," continued the outlaw leader. "An' I'm obliged. Fellers, search Riggs an' we'll divvy. Thet all right, Jim?"

"Shore, an' you can have my share."

They found banknotes in the man's pocket and considerable gold worn in a money belt around his waist. Shady Jones appropriated his boots, and Moze his gun. Then they left him as he had fallen.

"Jim, you'll have to track them lost hosses. Two still missin' an' one of them's mine," called Anson as Wilson paced to the end of his beat.

The girl heard Anson, for she put her head out of the spruce shelter and called, "Riggs said he'd hid two of the horses. They must be close. He came that way."

"Howdy, kid! Thet's good news," replied Anson. His spirits were rising. "He must hev wanted you to slope with him?"

"Yes. I wouldn't go."

"An' then he hit you?"

"Yes."

The girl withdrew her white face.

"It's break camp, boys," was the leader's order. "A couple of you look up them hosses. They'll be hid in some thick spruces. The rest of us'll pack."

Soon the gang was on the move, heading toward the height of land, and swerving from it only to find soft and grassy ground that would not leave any tracks.

They did not travel more than a dozen miles during the afternoon, but they climbed bench after bench until they reached the timbered plateau that stretched in sheer black slope up to the peaks. Here rose the great and gloomy forest of firs and pines, with the spruce overshadowed and thinned out. The last hour of travel was tedious and toilsome, a zigzag, winding, breaking, climbing hunt for the kind of camp site suited to Anson's fancy. He seemed to be growing strangely irrational about selecting places to camp. At last, for no reason that could have been manifest to a good woodsman, he chose a gloomy bowl in the center of the densest forest that had been traversed.

The opening, if such it could have been called, was not a park or even a glade. A dark cliff, with strange holes, rose to one side, but not so high as the lofty pines that brushed it. Along its base babbled a brook, running over such formation of rock that from different points near at hand it gave forth different sounds, some singing, others melodious, and one at least of a hollow, weird, deep sound, not loud, but strangely penetrating.

"Sure spooky, I say," observed Shady.

The little uplift of mood, coincident with the rifling of Riggs's person, had not worn over to this evening camp. What talk the outlaws indulged in was necessary and conducted in low tones. The place enjoined silence.

Wilson performed for the girl very much the same service as he had the night before. Only he advised her not to starve herself; she must eat to keep up her strength. She complied at the expense of considerable effort.

As it had been a back-breaking day

in which all of them, except the girl, had climbed miles on foot, they did not linger awake long enough after supper to learn what a wild, weird and pitch-black spot the outlaw leader had chosen. The little spaces of open ground between the huge-trunked pine trees had no counterpart up in the lofty spreading foliage. Not a star could blink a wan ray of light into that Stygian pit.

The wind, cutting down over abrupt heights farther up, sang in the pine needles as if they were strings vibrant with chords. Dismal creaks were audible. They were the forest sounds of branch or tree rubbing one another, but which needed the corrective medium of daylight to convince any human that they were other than ghostly. Then, despite the wind and despite the changing murmur of the brook, there seemed to be a silence insulating them, as deep and impenetrable as the darkness.

But the outlaws, who were fugitives now, slept the sleep of the weary, and heard nothing. They awoke with the sun, when the forest seemed smoky in a golden gloom, when light and bird and squirrel proclaimed the day.

The horses had not strayed out of this basin during the night, a circumstance that Anson was not slow to appreciate.

"It ain't no cheerful camp, but I never seen a safer place to hole up in," he remarked to Wilson.

"Wal, yes—if any place is safe," replied that ally dubiously.

"We can watch our back tracks. There ain't any other way to git in hyar that I see."

"Snake, we was tolerable fair sheep rustlers, but we're no good woodsmen."

Anson grumbled his disdain of this

comrade who had once been his mainstay. Then he sent Burt out to hunt fresh meat and engaged his other men at cards. As they now had the means to gamble, they at once became absorbed. Wilson smoked and divided his thoughtful gaze between the gamblers and the drooping figure of the girl.

The morning air was keen, and she, evidently not caring to be near her captors beside the campfire, had sought the only sunny spot in this gloomy dell. A couple of hours passed; the sun climbed high; the air grew warmer. Once the outlaw leader raised his head to scan the heavy-timbered slopes that inclosed the camp.

"Jim, them hosses are strayin' off," he observed.

Wilson leisurely rose and stalked off across the small, open patches, in the direction of the horses. They had grazed around from the right toward the outlet of the brook. Here headed a ravine, dense and green. Two of the horses had gone down. Wilson evidently heard them, though they were not in sight, and he circled somewhat so as to get ahead of them and drive them back. The invisible brook ran down over the rocks with murmur and babble. He halted with instinctive action. He listened.

Forest sounds, soft, lulling, came on the warm, pine-scented breeze. It would have taken no keen ear to hear soft and rapid padded footfalls. He moved on cautiously and turned into a little open, mossy spot, brown-matted and odorous, full of ferns and bluebells. In the middle of this, deep in the moss, he espied a huge round track of a cougar. He bent over it. Suddenly he stiffened, then straightened guardedly. At that instant he received a hard prod in the back. Throwing up his

hands, he stood still, then slowly turned.

A tall hunter in gray buckskin, gray-eyed and square-jawed, had him covered with a cocked rifle. And beside this hunter stood a monster cougar, snarling and blinking.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

The Play's the Thing

"**H**OWDY, Dale," drawled Wilson. "I reckon you're a little previous on me."

"Sssssh! Not so loud," said the hunter in a low voice. "You're Jim Wilson?"

"Shore am. Say, Dale, you showed up soon. Or did you jest happen to run acrost us?"

"I've trailed you. Wilson, I'm after the girl."

"I knowed thet when I seen you!"

The cougar seemed actuated by the threatening position of his master, and he opened his mouth, showing great yellow fangs, and spat at Wilson. The outlaw apparently had no fear of Dale or the cocked rifle, but that huge, snarling cat occasioned him uneasiness.

"Wilson, I've heard you spoken of as a white outlaw," said Dale.

"Mebbe I am. But shore I'll be a scared one in a minit. Dale, he's goin' to jump me!"

"The cougar won't jump you unless I make him. Wilson, if I let you go will you get the girl for me?"

"Wal, lemme sec. Supposin' I refuse?" queried Wilson shrewdly.

"Then, one way or another, it's all up with you."

"Reckon I ain't got much choice. Yes,

I'll do it. But, Dale, are you goin' to take my word for thet an' let me go back to Anson?"

"Yes, I am. You're no fool. An' I believe you're square. I've got Anson and his gang corralled. You can't slip me—not in these woods. I could run off your horses—pick you off one by one—or turn the cougar loose on you at night."

"Shore. It's your game. Anson dealt himself this hand. Between you an' me, Dale, I never liked the deal."

"Who shot Riggs? I found his body."

"Wal, yours truly was around when thet came off," replied Wilson with an involuntary little shudder.

"The girl? Is she safe—unharm'd?" queried Dale hurriedly.

"She's shore jest as safe an' sound as when she was home. Dale, she's the gamest kid thet ever breathed! Why, no one could hev ever made me believe a girl, a kid like her, could hev the nerve she's got. Nothin's happened to her 'cept Riggs hit her in the mouth. I killed him for thet. An', so help me, God, I believe it's been workin' in me to save her somehow! Now it'll not be so hard."

"But how?" demanded Dale.

"Lemme see—Wal, I've got to sneak her out of camp an' meet you. Thet's all."

"It must be done quick."

"But Dale, listen," remonstrated Wilson earnestly. "Too quick'll be as bad as too slow. Snake is sore these days, gittin' sorer all the time. He might savvy somethin', if I ain't careful, an' kill the girl or do her harm. I know these fellers. They're all ready to go to pieces. An' shore I must play safe. Shore it'd be safer to have a plan."

Wilson's shrewd, light eyes gleamed with an idea. He was about to lower

one of his upraised hands, evidently to point to the cougar, when he thought better of that.

"Anson's scared of cougars. Mebbe we can scare him an' the gang so it'd be easy to sneak the girl off. Can you make that big brute do tricks? Rush the camp at night an' squall an' chase off the horses?"

"I'll guarantee to scare Anson out of ten years growth," replied Dale.

"Shore it's a go, then," resumed Wilson, as if glad. "I'll post the girl—give her a hunch to do her part. You sneak up tonight jest before dark. I'll hev the gang worked up. An' then you put the cougar to his tricks, whatever you want. When the gang gits wild I'll grab the girl an' pack her off down heah or somewheres aboot an' whistle fer you—But mebbe that ain't so good. If that cougar comes pilin' into camp he might jump me instead of one of the gang. An' another hunch. He might slope up on me in the dark when I was tryin' to find you. Shore that ain't appealin' to me."

"Wilson, this cougar is a pet," replied Dale. "You think he's dangerous, but he's not. No more than a kitten. He only looks fierce. He has never been hurt by a person an' he's never fought anythin' himself but deer an' bear. I can make him trail any scent. But the truth is I couldn't make him hurt you or anybody. All the same, he can be made to scare the hair off anyone who doesn't know him."

"Shore that settles me. I'll be havin' a grand joke while them fellers is scared to death. Dale, you can depend on me. An' I'm beholden to you fer what'll square me some with myself. Tonight, an' if it won't work then, tomorrer night shore!"

Dale lowered the rifle. The big cou-

gar spat again. Wilson dropped his hands and, stepping forward, split the green wall of intersecting spruce branches. Then he hurried up the ravine toward the glen. Once there, in sight of his comrades, his action and expression changed.

"Hosses all thar, Jim?" asked Anson as he picked up his cards.

"Shore. They act awful queer, them hosses," replied Wilson. "They're afraid of somethin'."

"A-huh! Silvertip mebbe," muttered Anson. "Jim, you jest keep watch of them hosses. We'd be done if some 'tarnal varmit stampeded them."

"Reckon I'm elected to do all the work now," complained Wilson, "while you card sharps cheat each other. Rustle the hosses—an' water an' firewood. Cook an' wash. Hey?"

"No one I ever seen can do them camp tricks any better'n Jim Wilson," replied Anson.

"Jim, you're a lady's man an' thar's our pretty hoodoo over thar to feed an' amoose," remarked Shady Jones with a smile that disarmed his speech.

The outlaws guffawed.

"Git out, Jim, you're breakin' up the game," said Moze, who appeared loser.

"Wal, thet gurl would starve if it wasn't fer me," replied Wilson genially, and he walked over toward her, beginning to address her, quite loudly, as he approached. "Wal, Miss, I'm elected cook an' I'd shore like to heah what you fancy fer dinner."

The girl looked up amazed. Wilson was winking at her, and when he got near he began to speak rapidly and low.

"I jest met Dale down in the woods with his pet cougar. He's after you. I'm goin' to help him git you safe away. Now you do your part. I want you to

pretend you've gone crazy. Savvy? Act out of your head! Shore I don't care what you do or say, only act crazy. An' don't be scared. We're goin' to scare the gang so I'll hev a chance to sneak you away. Tonight or tomorrow—shore."

Before he began to speak she was pale, sad, dull of eye. Swiftly, with his words, she was transformed, and when he had ended she did not appear the same girl. She gave him one blazing flash of comprehension and nodded her head rapidly.

"Yes, I understand. I'll do it!" she whispered.

The outlaw turned slowly away with the most abstract air, confounded amid his shrewd acting, and he did not collect himself until halfway back to his comrades. Then, beginning to hum a tune, he stirred up and replenished the fire, and set about preparation for the midday meal. But he did not miss anything going on around him. He saw the girl go into her shelter and come out with her hair all down over her face. Wilson, back to his comrades, grinned his glee, and he wagged his head as if he thought the situation was developing.

The gambling outlaws, however, did not at once see the girl preening herself and smoothing her long hair in a way calculated to startle.

"Busted!" ejaculated Anson with a curse, as he slammed down his cards. "If I ain't hoodooed I'm a two-bit of a gambler!"

"Sartin you're hoodooed," said Shady Jones in scorn. "Is thet jest dawnin' on you?"

"Boss, you play like a cow stuck in the mud," remarked Moze laconically.

"Fellers, it ain't funny," declared Anson with pathetic gravity. "I'm jest

gittin' on to myself. Somethin's wrong. Since 'way last fall no luck—nothin' but the wust end of everythin'. I ain't blamin' anybody. I'm the boss. It's me thet's off."

"Snake, shore it was the gurl deal you made," rejoined Wilson, who had listened. "I told you. Our troubles hev only begun. An' I can see the wind-up. Look!"

Wilson pointed to where the girl stood, her hair flying wildly all over her face and shoulders. She was making most elaborate bows to an old stump, sweeping the ground with her tresses in her obeisance.

Anson started. He grew utterly astounded. His amazement was ludicrous. And the other two men looked to stare, to equal their leader's bewilderment.

"What'n hell's come over her?" asked Anson dubiously. "Must hev perked up—but she ain't feelin' thet gay!"

Wilson tapped his forehead with a significant finger. "Shore I was scared of her this mawnin'," he whispered.

"Naw!" exclaimed Anson incredulously.

"If she hain't queer I never seen no queer wimmin," vouchsafed Shady Jones, and it would have been judged, by the way he wagged his head, that he had been all his days familiar with women.

Moze looked beyond words, and quite alarmed.

"I seen it comin'," declared Wilson, very much excited. "But I was scared to say so. You-all made fun of me about her. Now I shore wish I had spoken up."

Anson nodded solemnly. He did not believe the evidence of his sight, but the facts seemed stunning. As if the girl were a dangerous and incompre-

hensible thing, he approached her step by step. Wilson followed, and the others appeared drawn irresistibly.

"Hey thar—kid!" called Anson hoarsely.

The girl drew her slight form up haughtily. Through her spreading tresses her eyes gleamed unnaturally upon the outlaw leader. But she deigned not to reply.

"Hey thar—you Rayner girl!" added Anson lamely. "What's ailin' you?"

"My lord! did you address me?" she asked loftily.

"Aww!" breathed Anson heavily.

Ophelia awaits your command, my lord. I've been gathering flowers," she said sweetly, holding up her empty hands as if they contained a bouquet.

Shady Jones exploded in convulsed laughter. But his merriment was not shared. And suddenly it brought disaster upon him. The girl flew at him.

"Why do you croak, you toad? I will have you whipped and put in irons, you scullion!" she cried passionately.

Shady underwent a remarkable change, and stumbled in his backward retreat. Then she snapped her fingers in Moze's face.

"You black devil! Get hence! Avaunt!"

Anson plucked up courage enough to touch her.

"Aww! Now, Ophelyar—"

Probably he meant to try to humor her, but she screamed, and he jumped back as if she might burn him. She screamed shrilly, in wild, staccato notes.

"You! You!" she pointed her finger at the outlaw leader. "You brute to women! You ran off from your wife!"

Anson turned plum-color and then slowly white. The girl must have sent a random shot home.

"And now the devil's turned you into a snake. A long, scaly snake with green eyes! Uugh! You'll crawl on your belly soon—when my cowboy finds you. And he'll tramp you in the dust."

She floated away from them and began to whirl gracefully, arms spread and hair flying; and then, apparently oblivious of the staring men, she broke into a low, sweet song. Next she danced around a pine, then danced into her little green inclosure, from which presently she sent out the most doleful moans.

"Aww! What a shame!" burst out Anson. "Thet fine, healthy, nerry kid! Clean gone! Daffy! Crazy's a bedbug!"

"Shore it's a shame," protested Wilson. "But it's wuss for us. Lord! if we was hoodooed before, what will we be now? Didn't I tell you, Snake Anson? You was warned. Ask Shady an' Moze—they see what's up."

"No luck'll ever come our way ag'in," predicted Shady mournfully.

"It beats me, Boss, it beats me," muttered Moze.

"A crazy woman on my hands! If thet ain't the last straw!" broke out Anson tragically, as he turned away. Ignorant, superstitious, worked upon by things as they seemed, the outlaw imagined himself at last beset by malign forces. When he flung himself down upon one of the packs his big red-haired hands shook. Shady and Moze resembled two other men at the end of their ropes.

Wilson's tense face twitched, and he averted it as apparently he fought off a paroxysm of some nature. Just then Anson swore a thundering oath.

"Crazy or not, I'll git gold out of thet kid!" he roared.

"But, man, talk sense. Are you gittin' daffy, too? I declare this outfit's been

eatin' loco. You can't git gold fer her!" said Wilson deliberately.

"Why can't I?"

"'Cause we're tracked. We can't make no dickers. Why, in another day or so we'll be dodgin' lead."

"Tracked! Whar'd you git thet idee? As soon as this?" queried Anson, lifting his head like a striking snake. His men, likewise, betrayed sudden interest.

"Shore it's no idee. I ain't seen anyone. But I feel it in my senses. I hear somebody comin'—a step on our trail—all the time—night in particular. Reckon there's a big posse after us."

"Wal, if I see or hear anythin' I'll knock the girl on the head an' we'll dig out of hyar," replied Anson.

Wilson executed a swift forward motion, violent and passionate, so utterly unlike what might have been looked for from him, that the three outlaws gaped.

"Then you'll shore hev to knock Jim Wilson on the haid first," he said.

"Jim! You wouldn't go back on me!" implored Anson with uplifted hands.

"I'm losin' my haid, too, an' you shore might as well knock it in, an' you'll hev to before I'll stand you murderin' thet pore little gurl you've drove crazy."

"Jim, I was only mad," replied Anson. "Fer thet matter, I'm growin' daffy myself. Aw! we-all need a good stiff drink of whisky."

So he tried to throw off gloom and apprehension, but he failed. His comrades did not rally to his help. Wilson walked away, nodding his head.

"Boss, let Jim alone," whispered Shady. "It's orful the way you buck ag'in him—when you seen he's stirred up. Jim's true-blue. But you gotta be careful."

When the card-playing was resumed, Anson did not join the game, and both Moze and Shady evinced little of that whole-hearted obsession which usually attended their gambling. Anson lay at length, his head in a saddle, scowling at the little shelter where the captive girl kept herself out of sight. At times a faint song or laugh, very unnatural, was wafted across the space.

Wilson plodded at the cooking and apparently heard no sounds. Presently he called the men to eat, which office they surlily and silently performed, as if it was a favor bestowed upon the cook.

"Snake, hadn't I ought to take a bite of grub over to the gurl?" asked Wilson.

"Do you hev to ask me thet?" snapped Anson. "She's gotta be fed, if we hev to stuff it down her throat."

"Wal, I ain't 'stuck on the job," replied Wilson. "But I'll tackle it, seein' you-all got cold feet."

With plate and cup he reluctantly approached the little lean-to, and, kneeling, he put his head inside. The girl, quick-eyed and alert, had evidently seen him coming. At any rate, she greeted him with a cautious smile.

"Jim, was I pretty good?" she whispered.

"Miss, you was shore the finest actress I ever seen," he responded in a low voice. "But you darn near overdid it. I'm goin' to tell Anson you're sick now—poisoned or somethin' awful. Then we'll wait till night. Dale shore will help us out."

"Oh, I'm on fire to get away," she exclaimed. "Jim Wilson, I'll never forget you as long as I live!"

He seemed greatly embarrassed. "Wal—Miss—I—I'll do my best licks. But I ain't gamblin' none on results. Be

patient. Keep your nerve. Don't get scared. I reckon between me an' Dale yo'll git away from heah."

Withdrawing his head, he got up and returned to the campfire, where Anson was waiting curiously.

"I left the grub. But she didn't touch it. Seems sort of sick to me, like she was poisoned."

"Jim, didn't I hear you talkin'?" asked Anson.

"Shore. I was coaxin' her. Reckon she ain't so ranty as she was. But she shore is doubled up an' sickish."

"Wuss an' wuss all the time," said Anson between his teeth. "An' where's Burt? Hyar it's noon an' he left early. He never was no woodsman. He's got lost."

"Either thet or he's run into some-thin'," replied Wilson thoughtfully.

Anson doubled a huge fist and cursed deep under his breath—the reaction of a man whose accomplices and partners and tools, whose luck, whose faith in himself had failed him. He flung himself down under a tree, and after a while, when his rigidity relaxed, he probably fell asleep.

Moze and Shady kept at their game. Wilson paced to and fro, sat down, and then got up to bunch the horses again, walked around the dell and back to camp. The afternoon hours were long. And they were waiting hours. The act of waiting appeared on the surface of all these outlaws did.

At sunset the golden gloom of the glen changed to a vague, thick twilight. Anson rolled over, yawned, and sat up. As he glanced around, evidently seeking Burt, his face clouded.

"No sign of Burt?" he asked.

Wilson expressed a mild surprise. "Wal, Snake, you ain't expectin' Burt now?"

"I am, course I am. Why not?" demanded Anson. "Any other time we'd look fer him, wouldn't we?"

"Any other time ain't now. Burt won't ever come back!" Wilson spoke with a positive finality.

"A-huh! Some more of them queer feelin's of yourn—operatin' again, hey? Them onnatural kind thet you can't explain, hey?" Anson's queries were bitter and rancorous.

"Yes. An' Snake, I tax you with this heah. Ain't any of them queer feelin's operatin' in you?"

"No!" rolled out the leader savagely. But his passionate denial was proof that he lied. From the moment of this outburst, which was a fierce clinging to the old, brave instincts of his character, unless a sudden change marked the nature of his fortunes, he would rapidly deteriorate to the breaking-point. And in such brutal, unrestrained natures as his this breaking-point meant a desperate stand, a desperate forcing of events, a desperate accumulation of passions that stalked out to deal and to meet disaster and blood and death.

Wilson put a little wood on the fire and munched a biscuit. No one asked him to cook. No one made any effort to do so. One by one each man went to the pack to get some bread and meat.

Then they waited as men who knew not what they waited for, yet hated and dreaded it.

Twilight in that glen was naturally a strange, veiled condition of the atmosphere. It was a merging of shade and light, which two seemed to make gray, creeping shadows.

Suddenly a snorting and stamping of the horses startled the men.

"Somethin' scared the hosses," said Anson, rising. "Come on."

Moze accompanied him, and they

disappeared in the gloom. More trampling of hoofs was heard, then a cracking of brush, and the deep voices of men. At length the two outlaws returned, leading three of the horses, which they halted in the open glen.

The campfire light showed Anson's face dark and serious.

"Jim, them hosses are wilder'n deer," he said. "I ketched mine, an' Moze got two. But the rest worked away whenever we come close. Some varmint has scared them bad. We all gotta rustle out hyar quick."

Wilson rose, shaking his head doubtfully. And at that moment the quiet air split to the piercing neigh of a terrified horse. Prolonged to a screech, it broke and ended. Then followed snorts of fright, pound and crack and thud of hoofs, and crash of brush; then a gathering thumping, crashing roar, split by piercing sounds.

"Stampede!" yelled Anson, and he ran to hold his own horse, which he had halted right in camp. It was big and wild-looking, and now reared and plunged to break away. Anson just got there in time, and then it took all his weight to pull the horse down.

Not until the crashing, snorting, pounding *mêlée* had subsided and died away over the rim of the glen did Anson dare leave his frightened favorite.

"Gone! Our horses are gone! Did you hear 'em?" he exclaimed blankly.

"Shore. They're a cut-up an' crippled bunch by now," replied Wilson.

"Thet settles us, Snake Anson," stridently added Shady Jones. "Them hosses are gone! You can kiss your hand to them. They wasn't hobbled. They hed an orful scare. They split on thet stampede an' they'll never git together. See what you've fetched us to!"

Under the force of this triple arraign-

ment the outlaw leader dropped to his seat, staggered and silenced. In fact, silence fell upon all the men and likewise enfolded the glen.

Night set in, jet-black, dismal, lonely, without a star. Faintly the wind moaned. Weirdly the brook babbled through its strange chords to end in the sound that was hollow. It was never the same—a rumble, as if faint, distant thunder—a deep gurgle, as of water drawn into a vortex—a rolling, as of a stone in swift current. The black cliff was invisible, yet seemed to have many weird faces; the giant pines loomed spectral; the shadows were thick, moving, changing.

Flickering lights from the campfire circled the huge trunks and played fantastically over the brooding men. This campfire did not burn or blaze cheerily; it had no glow, no sputter, no white heart, no red, living embers. One by one the outlaws, as if with common consent, tried their hands at making the fire burn aright. What little wood had been collected was old; it would burn up with false flare, only to die quickly.

After a while not one of the outlaws spoke or stirred. Not one spoke. Their gloomy eyes were fixed on the fire. Each one was concerned with his own thoughts, his own lonely soul unconsciously full of a doubt of the future. That brooding hour severed him from comrade.

At night nothing seemed the same as it was by day. With success and plenty, with full-blooded action past and more in store, these outlaws were as different from their present state as this black night was different from the bright day they waited for. Wilson, though he played a game of deceit for the sake of the helpless girl—and thus

did not have haunting and superstitious fears on her account—was probably more conscious of impending catastrophe than any of them.

The evil they had done spoke in the voice of nature, out of the darkness, and was interpreted by each according to his hopes and fears. Fear was their predominating sense. For years they had lived with some species of fear—of honest men or vengeance, of pursuit, of starvation, of lack of drink or gold, of blood and death, of stronger men, of luck, of chance, of fate, of mysterious nameless force. Wilson was the type of fearless spirit, but he endured the most gnawing and implacable fear of all—that of himself—that he must inevitably fall to deeds beneath his manhood.

So they hunched around the campfire, brooding because hope was at lowest ebb; listening because the weird black silence, with its moan of wind and hollow laugh of brook, compelled them to hear; waiting for sleep, for the hours to pass, for whatever was to come.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

Shots in the Night

LISTEN!" Anson whispered tensely. His poise was motionless, his eyes roved everywhere. He held up a shaking finger, to command silence.

A third and stranger sound accompanied the low, weird moan of the wind, and the hollow mockery of the brook—and it seemed a barely perceptible, exquisitely delicate wail or whine. It filled in the lulls between the other sounds.

"If thet's some varmint he's close," whispered Anson.

"But shore, it's far off," said Wilson.

Shady Jones and Moze divided their opinions in the same way.

All breathed more freely when the wail ceased, relaxing to their former lounging positions around the fire. An impenetrable wall of blackness circled the pale space lighted by the campfire; and this circle contained the dark, somber group of men in the center, the dying campfire, and a few spectral trunks of pines and the tethered horses on the outer edge. The horses scarcely moved from their tracks, and their erect, alert heads attested to their sensitiveness to the peculiarities of the night.

Then, at an unusually quiet lull, the strange sound gradually arose to a wailing whine.

"It's thet crazy wench cryin'," declared the outlaw leader.

Apparently his allies accepted that statement with as much relief as they had expressed for the termination of the sound.

"Shore, thet must be it," agreed Jim Wilson gravely.

"We'll git a lot of sleep with thet gurl whinin' all night," growled Shady Jones.

"She gives me the creeps," said Moze.

Wilson got up to resume his pondering walk, head bent, hands behind his back, a grim, realistic figure of perturbation.

"Jim—set down. You make me nervous," said Anson irritably.

Wilson actually laughed, but low, as if to keep his strange mirth well confined.

"Snake, I'll bet you my hoss an' my gun ag'in a biscuit thet in aboot six

seconds more or less I'll be stampedin' like them hosses."

Anson's lean jaw dropped. The other two outlaws stared with round eyes. Wilson was not drunk, they evidently knew; but what he really was appeared a mystery.

"Jim Wilson, are you showin' yellow?" queried Anson hoarsely.

"Mebbe. The Lord only knows. But listen heah—Snake, you've seen an' heard people croak?"

"You mean cash in—die?"

"Shore."

"Wal, yes—a couple or so," replied Anson grimly.

"But you never seen no one die of shock—of an orful scare?"

"No, I reckon I never did."

"I have. An' that's what's ailin' Jim Wilson," and he resumed his dogged steps.

"A-huh! Say, what's thet got to do with us hyar?" asked Anson presently.

"Thet gurl is dyin'!" retorted Wilson in a voice cracking like a whip.

The three outlaws stiffened in their seats, incredulous, yet irresistibly swayed by emotions that stirred to this dark, lonely, ill-omened hour.

Wilson trudged to the edge of the lighted circle, muttering to himself, and came back again; then he trudged farther, this time almost out of sight, but only to return; the third time he vanished in the impenetrable wall of night. The three men scarcely moved a muscle as they watched the place where he had disappeared. In a few moments he came stumbling back.

"Shore she's almost gone," he said dismally. "It took my nerve, but I felt of her face. Thet orful wail is her breath chokin' in her throat—like a death rattle, only long instead of short."

"Wal, if she's gotta croak it's good she gits it over quick," replied Anson. "I ain't hed sleep fer three nights. An' what I need is whisky."

"Snake, thet's gospel you're spoutin'," remarked Shady Jones morosely.

The direction of sound in the glen was difficult to be assured of, but any man not stirred to a high pitch of excitement could have told that the difference in volume of this strange wail must have been caused by different distances and positions. Also, when it was loudest, it was most like a whine. But these outlaws heard with their consciences.

At last it ceased abruptly.

Wilson again left the group to be swallowed up by the night. His absence was longer than usual, but he returned hurriedly.

"She's daid!" he exclaimed solemnly. "Thet innocent kid—who never harmed no one—an' who'd make any man better fer secin' her—she's daid! Anson, you've shore a heap to answer fer when your time comes."

"What's eatin' you?" demanded the leader angrily. "Her blood ain't on my hands."

"It shore is," shouted Wilson, shaking his hand at Anson. "An' you'll hev to take your medicine. I felt thet comin' all along. An' I feel some more."

"Aw! She's jest gone to sleep," declared Anson, shaking his long frame as he rose. "Gimme a light."

"Boss, you're plumb off to go near a dead gurl thet's jest died crazy," protested Shady Jones.

"Off! Haw! Haw! Who ain't off in this outfit, I'd like to know?"

Anson possessed himself of a stick blazing at one end, and with this he stalked off toward the lean-to where the girl was supposed to be dead. His

gaunt figure, lighted by the torch, certainly fitted the weird, black surroundings. And it was seen that once near the girl's shelter he proceeded more slowly, until he halted. He bent to peer inside.

"SHE'S GONE!" he yelled in harsh, shaken accents.

Then the torch burned out, leaving only a red glow. He whirled it about, but the blaze did not rekindle. His comrades, peering intently, lost sight of his tall form and the glowing end of the stick. Darkness like pitch swallowed him. For a moment no sound intervened.

Again the moan of wind, the strange little mocking hollow roar, dominated the place. Then there came a rush of something, perhaps of air, like the soft swishing of spruce branches swinging aside. Dull, thudding footsteps followed it. Anson came running back to the fire. His aspect was wild, his face pale. His eyes were fierce and starting from their sockets. He had drawn his gun.

"Did—ye—see er hear—anythin'?" he panted, peering back, then all around, and at last at his man.

"No. An' I shore was lookin' an' listenin'," replied Wilson.

"Boss, there wasn't nothin'," declared Moze.

"I ain't so sartin," said Shady Jones with doubtful, staring eyes. "I believe I heered a rustlin'."

"She wasn't there!" ejaculated Anson, in wondering awe. "She's gone! My torch went out. I couldn't see. An' jest then I felt somethin' was passin'. Fast! I jerked 'round. All was black, an' yet if I didn't see a big gray streak I'm crazier'n thet gurl. But I couldn't swear to anythin' but a rushin' of wind. I felt thet."

"Gone!" exclaimed Wilson in great

alarm. "Fellers, if thet's so, then mebbe she wasn't daid an' she wandered off. But she was daid! Her heart hed quit beatin'. I'll swear to thet."

"I move to break camp," said Shady Jones gruffly, and he stood up. Moze seconded that move by an expressive flash of his black visage.

"Jim, if she's dead—an' gone—what'n hell's come off?" huskily asked Anson. "It only seems that way. We're all worked up. Let's talk sense."

"Anson, shore there's a heap you an' me don't know," replied Wilson. "The world come to an end once. Wal, it can come to another end. I tell you I ain't surprised—"

"Thar!" cried Anson, whirling, with his gun leaping out.

Something huge, shadowy, gray against the black rushed behind the men and trees; and following it came a perceptible acceleration of the air.

"Shore, Snake, there wasn't nothin'," said Wilson presently.

"I heerd," whispered Shady Jones.

"It was only a breeze blowin' thet smoke," rejoined Moze.

"I'd bet my soul somethin' went back of me," declared Anson, glaring into the void.

"Listen an' let's make shore," suggested Wilson.

The guilty, agitated faces of the outlaws showed plain enough in the flickering light for each to see a convicting dread in his fellow. Like statues they stood, watching and listening.

Few sounds stirred in the strange silence. Now and then the horses heaved heavily, but stood still; a dismal, dreary note of the wind in the pines vied with a hollow laugh of the brook. And these low sounds only fastened attention upon the quality of the silence. A breathing, lonely spirit of solitude

permeated the black dell. Like a pit of unplumbed depths the dark night yawned.

Suddenly the silent, oppressive, surcharged air split to a short, piercing scream.

Anson's big horse stood up straight, pawing the air, and came down with a crash. The other horses shook with terror.

"Wasn't—thet—a cougar?" whispered Anson thickly.

"Thet was a woman's scream," replied Wilson, and he appeared to be shaking like a leaf in the wind.

"Then—I figgered right—the kid's alive—wanderin' around—an' she let out thet orful scream," said Anson.

"Wanderin' 'round, yes—but she's daid!"

"My Gawd! it ain't possible!"

"Wal, if she ain't wanderin' round daid she's almost daid," replied Wilson. He began to whisper to himself.

"If I'd only knowed what thet deal meant I'd hev plugged Beasley instead of listenin'. An' I ought to hev knocked thet kid on the head an' made sartin she'd croaked. If she goes screamin' 'round thet way—"

His voice failed as there rose a thin, splitting, high-pointed shriek, somewhat resembling the first scream, only less wild. It came apparently from the cliff.

From another point in the pitch-black glen rose the wailing, terrible cry of a woman in agony. Wild, haunting, mournful wail!

Anson's horse, loosing the halter, plunged back, almost falling over a slight depression in the rocky ground. The outlaw caught him and dragged him nearer the fire. The other horses stood shaking and straining. Moze ran between them and held them. Shady

Jones threw green brush on the fire. With sputter and crackle a blaze started, showing Wilson standing tragically, his arms out, facing the black shadows.

The strange, live shriek was not repeated. But the cry, like that of a woman in her death throes, pierced the silence again. It left a quivering ring that softly died away. Then the stillness clamped down once more and the darkness seemed to thicken. The men waited, and when they had begun to relax the cry burst out appallingly close, right behind the trees.

It was human—the personification of pain and terror—the tremendous struggle of precious life against horrible death. So pure, so exquisite, so wonderful was the cry that the listeners writhed as if they saw an innocent, tender, beautiful girl torn frightfully before their eyes. It was full of suspense; it thrilled for death; its marvelous potency was the wild note—that beautiful and ghastly note of self-preservation.

In sheer desperation the outlaw leader fired his gun at the black wall whence the cry came. Then he had to fight his horse to keep him from plunging away. Following the shot was an interval of silence; the horses became tractable; the men gather closer to the fire, with the halters still held firmly.

"If it was a cougar—thet'd scare him off," said Anson.

"Shore, but it ain't a cougar," replied Wilson. "Wait an' see!"

They all waited, listening with ears turned to different points, eyes roving everywhere, afraid of their very shadows. Once more the moan of wind, the mockery of brook, deep gurgle, laugh and babble, dominated the silence of the glen.

"Boss, let's shake this spooky hole," whispered Moze.

The suggestion attracted Anson, and he pondered it while slowly shaking his head.

"We've only three hosses. An' mine'll take ridin'—after them squalls," replied the leader. "We've got packs, too. An' hell ain't nothin' on this place fer bein' dark."

"No matter. Let's go. I'll walk an' lead the way," said Moze eagerly. "I got sharp eyes. You fellers can ride an' carry a pack. We'll git out of here an' come back in daylight fer the rest of the outfit."

"Anson, I'm keen fer thet myself," declared Shady Jones.

"Jim, what d'ye say to thet?" queried Anson. "Rustlin' out of this black hole?"

"Shore, it's a grand idee," agreed Wilson.

"Thet was a cougar," avowed Anson, gathering courage as the silence remained unbroken. "But jest the same it was as tough on me as if it hed been a woman screamin' over a blade twistin' in her gizzard."

"Snake, shore you seen a woman heah lately?" deliberately asked Wilson.

"Reckon I did. Thet kid," replied Anson dubiously.

"Wal, you seen her go crazy, didn't you?"

"Yes."

"An' she wasn't heah when you went huntin' fer her?"

"Correct."

"Wal, if thet's so, what do you want to blab about cougars fer?"

Wilson's argument seemed incontestable. Shady and Moze nodded gloomily and shifted restlessly from foot to foot. Anson dropped his head.

"No matter—if we only don't hear—" he began, suddenly to grow mute.

Right upon them, from some place, just out the circle of light, rose a scream, by reason of its proximity the most piercing and agonizing yet heard, simply petrifying the group until the peal passed. Anson's huge horse reared, and with a snort of terror lunged in tremendous leap, straight out. He struck Anson with thudding impact, knocking him over the rocks into the depression back of the campfire, and plunging after him.

Wilson had made a flying leap just in time to avoid being struck, and he turned to see Anson go down. There came a crash, a groan, and then the strike and pound of hoofs as the horse struggled up. Apparently he had rolled over his master.

"Help, fellers!" yelled Wilson, quick to leap down over the little bank, and in the dim light to grasp the halter.

The three men dragged the horse out and securely tied him close to a tree. That done, they peered down into the depression. Anson's form could just barely be distinguished in the gloom. He lay stretched out. Another groan escaped him.

"Shore I'm scared he's hurt," said Wilson.

"Hoss rolled right on top of him. An' thet hoss's heavy," declared Moze.

They got down and knelt beside their leader. In the darkness his face looked dull gray. His breathing was not right.

"Snake, old man, you ain't—hurt?" asked Wilson with a tremor in his voice. Receiving no reply, he said to his comrades, "Lay hold an' we'll heft him up where we can see."

The three men carefully lifted Anson up on the bank and laid him near the fire in the light. Anson was conscious.

His face was ghastly. Blood showed on his lips.

Wilson knelt beside him. The other outlaws stood up, and with one dark gaze at one another damned Anson's chance of life. And on the instant rose that terrible distressing scream of acute agony—like that of a woman being dismembered. Shady Jones whispered something to Moze.

"Tell me where you're hurt?" asked Wilson.

"He—smashed—my chest," said Anson in a broken, strangled whisper.

Wilson's deft hands opened the outlaw's shirt and felt of his chest.

"No. Shore your breast bone ain't smashed," replied Wilson hopefully. And he began to run his hand around one side of Anson's body and then the other. Abruptly he stopped, averted his gaze, then slowly ran the hand all along that side. Anson's ribs had been broken and crushed in by the weight of the horse. He was bleeding at the mouth, and his slow, painful expulsions of breath brought a bloody froth, which showed that the broken bones had penetrated the lungs. An injury sooner or later fatal!

"Pard, you busted a rib or two," said Wilson.

"Aw, Jim—it must be—wuss'n that!" he whispered. "I'm—in orful—pain. An' I can't—git any—breath."

"Mebbe you'll be better," said Wilson with a cheerfulness his face belied.

Moze bent close over Anson, took a short scrutiny of that ghastly face, at the blood-stained lips, and the lean hands plucking at nothing. Then he jerked erect.

"Shady, he's goin' to cash. Let's clear out of this."

"I'm yours pertickler previous," replied Jones.



Both turned away. They untied the two horses and led them up to where the saddles lay. Swiftly the blankets went on, swiftly the saddles swung up, swiftly the cinches snapped. Anson lay gazing up at Wilson, comprehending this move.

"Shady, you grab some bread an' I'll pack a hunk of meat," said Moze. Both men came near the fire, into the light, within ten feet of where the leader lay.

"Fellers—you ain't—slopin'?" he whispered, in husky amazement.

"Boss, we air thet same. We can't do you no good an' this hole ain't healthy," replied Moze.

Shady Jones swung himself astride his horse, all about him sharp, eager, strung.

"Moze, I'll tote the grub an' you lead out of hyar, till we git past the wust timber," he said.

"Aw, Moze—you wouldn't leave—Jim hyar—alone," implored Anson.

"Jim can stay till he rots," retorted Moze. "I've hed enough of this hole."

"But, Moze—it ain't square—" panted Anson. "Jim wouldn't—leave me. I'd stick—by you—I'll make it—all up to you."

"Snake, you're goin' to cash," sardonically returned Moze.

A current leaped all through Anson's stretched frame. His ghastly face blazed. That was the great and the terrible moment which for long had been in abeyance. Wilson had known grimly that it would come, by one means or

another. Anson had doggedly and faithfully struggled against the tide of fatal issues. Moze and Shady Jones, deep locked in their self-centered motives, had not realized the inevitable trend of their dark lives.

Anson, prostrate as he was, swiftly drew his gun and shot Moze. Without sound or movement of hand Moze fell. Then the plunge of Shady's horse caused Anson's second shot to miss. A quick third shot brought no apparent result but Shady's cursing resort to his own weapon. He tried to aim from his plunging horse. His bullets spattered dust and gravel over Anson.

Then Wilson's long arm stretched and his heavy gun banged. Shady collapsed in the saddle, and the frightened horse, throwing him, plunged out of the circle of light. Thudding hoofs, crashings of brush, quickly ceased.

"Jim—did you—git him?"

"Shore did, Snake," was the slow, halting response. Jim Wilson sustained a sick shudder as he replied. Sheathing his gun, he folded a blanket and put it under Anson's head.

"Jim—my feet—air orful cold," whispered Anson.

"Wal, it's gittin' chilly," replied Wilson and, taking a second blanket, he laid that over Anson's limbs. "Snake, I'm feared Shady hit you once."

"A-huh! But not so I'd care—much—if I hed—no wuss hurt."

"You lay still now. Reckon Shady's hoss stopped out heah a ways. An' I'll see."

"Jim—I ain't heerd—thet scream fer—a little."

"Shore it's gone—reckon now thet was a cougar."

"I knowed it!"

Wilson stalked away into the dark-

ness. That inky wall did not seem so impenetrable and black after he had gotten out of the circle of light. He proceeded carefully and did not make any missteps. He groped from tree to tree toward the cliff and presently brought up against a huge flat rock as high as his head.

"Miss, are you there—all right?" he called softly.

"Yes, but I'm scared to death," she whispered in reply.

"Shore it wound up sudden. Come now. I reckon your trouble's over."

He helped her off the rock, and, finding her unsteady on her feet, he supported her with one arm and held the other out in front of him to feel for objects. Foot by foot they worked out from under the dense shadow of the cliff, following the course of the little brook. It babbled and gurgled, and almost drowned the low whistle Wilson sent out.

The girl dragged heavily upon him now, evidently weakening. At length he reached the little open patch at the head of the ravine. Halting here, he whistled. An answer came from somewhere behind him and to the right. Wilson waited, with the girl hanging on his arm.

"Dale's heah," he said. "An' don't you keel over now—after all the nerve you hed."

A swishing of brush, a step, a soft, padded footfall; a looming, dark figure, and a long, low gray shape, stealthily moving—it was the last of these that made Wilson jump.

"Wilson!" came Dale's subdued voice.

"Heah. I've got her, Dale. Safe an' sound," replied Wilson, stepping toward the tall form. And he put the drooping girl into Dale's arms.

"Bo! Bo! You're all right?" Dale's deep voice was tremulous.

"Oh, Dale! Oh, thank heaven! I'm ready to drop now. Hasn't it been a night—an adventure? I'm well—safe—sound. Dale, we owe it to this Jim Wilson."

"Bo, I—we'll all thank him—all our lives," replied Dale. "Wilson, you're a man! If you'll shake that gang—"

"Dale, shore there ain't much of a gang left, unless you let Burt git away."

"I didn't kill him—or hurt him. But I scared him so I'll bet he's runnin' yet. Wilson, did all the shootin' mean a fight?"

"Tolerable."

"Oh, Dale, it was terrible! I saw it all. I—"

"Wal, Miss, you can tell him after I go. I'm wishin' you good luck." His voice was a cool, easy drawl, slightly tremulous.

The girl's face flashed white in the gloom. She pressed against the outlaw—wrung his hands.

"Heaven help you, Jim Wilson! You are from Texas! I'll remember you—pray for you all my life!"

Wilson moved away, out toward the pale glow of light under the black pines.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

Way of the West

WATCHING Dale ride away on a quest perilous to him, and which meant almost life or death for her, it was surpassingly strange that Helen Rayner could think of nothing except the thrilling, tumultuous moment when she had put her arms round his neck.

It did not matter that Dale—splendid fellow that he was—had made the ensuing moment free of shame by taking her action as he had taken it—the fact that she had actually done it was enough. How utterly impossible for her to anticipate her impulses or to understand them, once they were acted upon! Confounding realization then was that when Dale returned with her sister, Helen knew she would do the same thing over again!

"If I do—I won't be two-faced about it," she soliloquized, and a hot blush flamed her cheeks.

She watched Dale until he rode out of sight.

When he had gone, worry and dread replaced this other confusing emotion. She turned to the business of meeting events. Before supper she packed her valuables and books, papers, and clothes, together with Bo's, and had them in readiness so if she was forced to vacate the premises she would have her personal possessions.

The Mormon boys and several other of her trusted men slept in their tarpaulin beds on the porch of the ranch house that night, so that Helen at least would not be surprised. But the day came undisturbed by any event. And it passed slowly with the leaden feet of listening, watching vigilance.

Carmichael did not come back, nor was there news of him to be had. The last known of him had been late the afternoon of the preceding day, when a sheepherder had seen him far out on the north range, headed for the hills. The Beemans reported that Roy's condition had improved, and also that there was a subdued excitement of suspense down in the village.

This second lonely night was almost unendurable for Helen. When she slept

it was to dream horrible dreams; when she lay awake it was to have her heart leap to her throat at a rustle of leaves near the window, and to be in torture of imagination as to poor Bo's plight. A thousand times Helen said to herself that Beasley could have had the ranch and welcome, if only Bo had been spared. Helen absolutely connected her enemy with her sister's disappearance. Riggs might have been a means to it.

Daylight was not attended by so many fears; there were things to do that demanded attention. And thus it was that the next morning, shortly before noon, she was recalled to her perplexities by a shouting out at the corrals and a galloping of horses somewhere near. From the window she saw a big smoke.

"Fire! That must be one of the barns—the old one, farthest out," she said, gazing out of the window. "Some careless Mexican with his everlasting cigarette!"

Helen resisted an impulse to go out and see what had happened. She had decided to stay in the house. But when footsteps sounded on the porch and a rap on the door, she unhesitatingly opened it. Four Mexicans stood close. One of them, quick as thought, flashed a hand in to grasp her, and in a single motion pulled her across the threshold.

"No hurt, Señora," he said and pointed, making motions she must go.

"How dare you!" she said, trembling in her effort to control her temper.

The Mexicans grinned. Another laid hold of Helen with a dirty brown hand. She shrank from the contact.

"Let go!" she burst out furiously. And instinctively she began to struggle to free herself. Then they all took hold of her.

A burning, choking rush of blood was her first acquaintance with the terrible passion of anger that was her inheritance from the Auchinclosses. She who had resolved never to lay herself open to indignity now fought like a tigress.

The Mexicans had all they could do, until they lifted her bodily from the porch. They handled her as if she had been a half-empty sack of corn. One holding each hand and foot they packed her, with dress disarranged and half torn off, down the path to the lane and down the lane to the road. There they stood upright and pushed her off her property.

Through half-blind eyes Helen saw them guarding the gateway, ready to prevent her entrance. She staggered down the road to the village. It seemed she made her way through a red dimness—that there was a congestion in her brain—that the distance to Mrs. Cass's cottage was insurmountable. But she got there, to stagger up the path, to hear the old woman's cry. Dizzy, faint, sick, with a blackness enveloping all she looked at, Helen felt herself led into the sitting-room and placed in the big chair.

Presently sight and clearness of mind returned to her. She saw Roy, white as a sheet, questioning her with terrible eyes. The old woman hung murmuring over her, trying to comfort her as well as fasten the disordered dress.

"Four men—packed me down—the hill—threw me off my ranch—into the road!" panted Helen.

She seemed to tell this also to her own consciousness and to realize the mighty wave of anger that shook her whole body.

"If I'd known—I would have killed

them!" she exclaimed, full-voiced and hard, with dry, hot eyes on her friends.

Roy reached out to take her hand, speaking huskily. Helen did not distinguish what he said. The frightened old woman knelt, with unsteady fingers fumbling over the rents in Helen's dress.

The moment came when Helen's quivering began to subside, when her blood quieted to let her reason away, when she began to do battle with her rage, and slowly to take fearful stock of this consuming peril that had been a sleeping tigress in her veins.

"Oh, Miss Helen, you looked so terrible, I made sure you was hurted," the old woman was saying.

Helen gazed strangely at her bruised wrists, at the one stocking that hung down over her shoe top, at the rent which had bared her shoulder.

"My body's—not hurt," she whispered.

Roy had lost some of his whiteness, and where his eyes had been fierce they were now kind.

"Wal, Miss Nell, it's lucky no harm's done. Now if you'll only see this whole deal clear! Not let it spoil your sweet way of lookin' an' hopin'! If you can only see what's raw in this West—an' love it jest the same!"

Helen only half divined his meaning. The West was beautiful, but hard.

"For the land's sakes, tell us all about it," importuned Mrs. Cass.

Whereupon Helen shut her eyes and told the brief narrative of her expulsion from her home.

"Shore we-all expected thet," said Roy. "An' it's jest as well you're here with a whole skin. Beasley's in possession now an' I reckon we'd all sooner hev you away from thet ranch."

"But, Roy, I won't let Beasley stay there," cried Helen.

"Miss Nell, shore by the time this here Pine has growed big enough fer law you'll hev gray in thet pretty hair. You can't put Beasley off with your honest an' rightful claim. Al Auchincloss was a hard driver. He made enemies an' he made some he didn't kill. The evil men do lives after them. An' you've got to suffer fer Al's sins, though Al was as good as any man who ever prospered in these parts."

"Oh, what can I do? I won't give up. I've been robbed. Can't the people help me? Must I meekly sit with my hands crossed while that half-breed thief—Oh, it's unbelievable!"

"I reckon you'll jest hev to be patient fer a few days," said Roy calmly. "It'll all come right in the end."

"Roy! You've had this deal, as you call it, all worked out in mind for a long time!" exclaimed Helen.

"Shore, an' I ain't missed a reckonin' yet."

"Then what will happen—in a few days?"

"Nell Rayner, are you goin' to hev some spunk an' not lose your nerve again or go wild out of your head?"

"I'll try to be brave, but—but I must be prepared," she replied tremulously.

"Wal, there's Dale an' Las Vegas an' me fer Beasley to reckon with. An' Miss Nell, his chances fer long life are as pore as his chances fer heaven!"

"But, Roy, I don't believe in deliberate taking of life," replied Helen, shuddering. "That's against my religion. I won't allow it. And—then—think, Dale, all of you—in danger!"

"Girl, how're you ever goin' to help yourself? Shore you might hold Dale back, if you love him, an' swear you won't give yourself to him. An' I reckon

on I'd respect your religion, if you was goin' to suffer through me. But not Dale nor you—nor Bo—nor love or heaven or hell can ever stop that cowboy Las Vegas!"

"Oh, if Dale brings Bo back to me—what will I care for my ranch?" murmured Helen.

"Reckon you'll only begin to care when that happens. Your big hunter has got to be put to work," replied Roy with his keen smile.

Before noon that day the baggage Helen had packed at home was left on the porch of Widow Cass's cottage, and Helen's anxious need of the hour was satisfied. She was made comfortable in the old woman's one spare room, and she set herself the task of fortitude and endurance.

To her surprise, many of Mrs. Cass's neighbors came unobtrusively to the back door of the little cottage and made sympathetic inquiries. They appeared a subdued and apprehensive group, and whispered to one another as they left. Helen gathered from their visits a conviction that the wives of the men dominated by Beasley believed no good could come of this high-handed taking over of the ranch. Indeed, Helen found at the end of the day that a strength had been borne of her misfortune.

The next day Roy informed her that his brother John had come down the preceding night with the news of Beasley's descent upon the ranch. Not a shot had been fired, and the only damage done was that of the burning of a hay-filled barn. This had been set on fire to attract Helen's men to one spot, where Beasley had ridden down upon them with three times their number.

He had boldly ordered them off the land, unless they wanted to acknowledge

him boss and remain there in his service. The three Beemans had stayed, having planned that just in this event they might be valuable to Helen's interests. Beasley had ridden down into Pine the same as upon any other day. Roy reported also news which had come in that morning, how Beasley's crowd had celebrated late the night before.

The second and third and fourth days endlessly wore away, and Helen believed they had made her old. At night she lay awake most of the time, thinking and praying, but during the afternoon she got some sleep. She could think of nothing and talk of nothing except her sister, and Dale's chances of saving her.

"Well, shore you pay Dale a pore compliment," finally protested the patient Roy. "I tell you—Milt Dale can do anythin' he wants to do in the woods. You can believe that. But I reckon he'll run chances after he comes back."

On the afternoon of the fifth day Helen was abruptly awakened from her nap. The sun had almost set. She heard voices—the shrill, cackling notes of old Mrs. Cass, high in excitement, a deep voice that made Helen tingle all over, a girl's laugh, broken but happy. There were footsteps and stamping of hoofs.

Dale had brought Bo back! Helen knew it. She grew very weak, and had to force herself to stand erect. Her heart began to pound in her very ears. A sweet and perfect joy suddenly flooded her soul. She thanked God her prayers had been answered. Then suddenly alive with sheer mad physical gladness, she rushed out.

She was just in time to see Roy Beeman stalk out as if he had never been

shot, and with a yell greet a big, gray-clad, gray-faced man—Dale.

"Howdy, Roy! Glad to see you up," said Dale.

How the quiet voice steadied Helen! She beheld Bo. Bo, looking the same, except a little pale and disheveled! Then Bo saw her and leaped at her, into her arms.

"Nell! I'm here! Safe—all right! Never was so happy in my life. Oh-h! talk about your adventures! Nell, you dear old mother to me—I've had e-enough forever!"

Bo was wild with joy, and by turns she laughed and cried. But Helen could not voice her feelings. Her eyes were so dim that she could scarcely see Dale when he loomed over her as she held Bo. But he found the hand she put shakily out.

"Nell! Reckon it's been harder—on you." His voice was earnest and halting. She felt his searching gaze upon her face. "Mrs. Cass said you were here. An' I know why."

Roy led them all indoors. "Milt, one of the neighbor boys will take care of thet hoss," he said, as Dale turned toward the dusty and weary Ranger. "Where'd you leave the cougar?"

"I sent him home," replied Dale.

"Laws now, Milt, if this ain't grand!" cackled Mrs. Cass. "We've worried some here. An' Miss Helen near starved a-hopin' fer you."

"Mother, I reckon the girl an' I are nearer starved than anybody you know," replied Dale with a grim laugh.

"Fer the land's sake! I'll be fixin' supper this minit."

"Nell, why are you here?" asked Bo suspiciously.

For answer Helen led her sister into the spare room and closed the door.

Bo saw the baggage. Her expression changed. The old blaze leaped to the telltale eyes.

"He's done it!" she cried hotly.

"Dearest—thank God. I've got you—back again!" murmured Helen, finding her voice. "Nothing else matters! I've prayed only for that!"

"Good old Nell!" whispered Bo, and she kissed and embraced Helen. "You really mean that, I know. But nix for yours truly! I'm back alive and kicking, you bet. Where's my—where's Tom?"

"Bo, not a word has been heard of him for five days. He's searching for you, of course."

"And you've been—been put off the ranch?"

"Well, rather," replied Helen, and in a few trembling words she told the story of her eviction.

Bo uttered a wild word that had more force than elegance, but it became her passionate resentment of this outrage done her sister.

"Oh! Does Tom Carmichael know this?" she added breathlessly.

"How could he?"

"When he finds out, then—Oh, won't there be hell? I'm glad I got here first. Nell, my boots haven't been off the whole blessed time. Help me. And oh, for some soap and hot water and some clean clothes! Nell, old girl, I wasn't raised right for these Western deals. Too luxurious!"

And then Helen had her ears filled with a rapid-fire account of running horses and Riggs and outlaws and Beasley called boldly to his teeth, and a long ride and an outlaw who was a hero—a fight with Riggs—blood and death—another long ride—a wild camp in black woods—night—lonely, ghostly sounds—and day again—plot—a great ac-

treasure lost to the world—Ophelia—Snakes and Ansons—hoodooed outlaws—mournful moans and terrible cries—cougar—stampede—fight and shots, more blood and death—Wilson hero—another Tom Carmichael—fallen in love with outlaw gun fighter if—black night and Dale and horse and rides and starved and, "Oh, Nell, he *was* from Texas!"

Helen gathered that wonderful and dreadful events had hung over the bright head of this beloved little sister, but the bewilderment occasioned by Bo's fluent and remarkable utterance left only that last sentence clear.

Presently Helen got a word in to inform Bo that Mrs. Cass had knocked twice for supper, and that welcome news checked Bo's flow of speech when nothing else seemed adequate.

It was obvious to Helen that Roy and Dale had exchanged stories. Roy celebrated this reunion by sitting at table the first time since he had been shot; and despite Helen's misfortune and the suspended waiting balance in the air the occasion was joyous. Old Mrs. Cass was in the height of her glory. She sensed a romance here, and, true to her sex, she radiated it.

Daylight was still lingering when Roy got up and went out on the porch. His keen ears had heard something. Helen fancied she herself had heard rapid hoofbeats.

"Dale, come out!" called Roy sharply.

The hunter moved with his swift, noiseless agility. Helen and Bo followed, halting in the door.

"That's Las Vegas," whispered Dale.

To Helen it seemed that the cowboy's name changed the very atmosphere.

Voices were heard at the gate; one that, harsh and quick, sounded like

Carmichael's. And a spirited horse was pounding and scattering gravel. Then a lithe figure appeared, striding up the path. It was Carmichael—yet not the Carmichael Helen knew. She heard Bo's strange little cry, a corroboration of her own impression.

Roy might never have been shot, judging from the way he stepped out, and Dale was almost as quick. Carmichael reached them—grasped them with swift, hard hands.

"Boys—I jest rode in. An' they said you'd found her!"

"Shore, Las Vegas. Dale fetched her home safe an' sound. There she is."

The cowboy thrust aside the two men, and with a long stride he faced the porch, his piercing eyes on the door. All that Helen could think of his look was that it seemed terrible. Bo stepped outside in front of Helen. Probably she would have run straight into Carmichael's arms if some strange instinct had not withheld her. Helen judged it to be fear; she found her heart lifting painfully.

"Bo!" he yelled.

"Oh—Tom!" cried Bo falteringly. She half held out her arms.

"You, girl?" That seemed to be his piercing query, like the quivering blade in his eyes. Two more long strides carried him close up to her, and his look chased the red out of Bo's cheek. Then it was beautiful to see his face marvelously change until it was that of the well-remembered Las Vegas magnified in all his old spirit.

"Aw!" The exclamation was a tremendous sigh. "I shore am glad!"

That beautiful flash left his face as he wheeled to the men. He wrung Dale's hand long and hard, and his gaze confused the older man.

"Riggs!" he said, and in the jerk of

his frame as he whipped out the word disappeared the strange, fleeting signs of his kindlier emotion.

"Wilson killed him," replied Dale.

"Jim Wilson—that old Texas Ranger! Reckon he lent you a hand?"

"My friend, he saved Bo," replied Dale with emotion. "My old cougar an' me—we just hung 'round."

"You made Wilson help you?" cut in the hard voice.

"Yes. But he killed Riggs before I come up an' I reckon he'd done well by Bo if I'd never got there."

"How about the gang?"

"All snuffed out, I reckon, except Wilson."

"Somebody told me Beasley he'd run Miss Helen off the ranch. Thet so?"

"Yes. Four of his men packed her down the hill—most tore her clothes off, so Roy tells me."

"Shore it was Beasley's deal clean through?"

"Yes. Riggs was led. He had an itch for a bad name, you know. But Beasley made the plan. It was Nell they wanted instead of Bo."

Abruptly Carmichael stalked off down the darkening path, his silver heel plates ringing, his spurs jingling.

"Hold on, Carmichael," called Dale, taking a step.

"Oh, Tom!" cried Bo.

"Shore folks callin' won't be no use, if anythin' would be," said Roy. "Las Vegas has hed a look at red liquor."

"He's been drinking! Oh, that accounts! Nell, he never—never even touched me!"

For once Helen was not ready to comfort Bo. A mighty tug at her heart had sent her with flying, uneven steps toward Dale. He took another stride down the path, and another.

"Dale—oh—please stop!" she called, very low.

He halted as if he had run sharply into a bar across the path. When he turned Helen had come close. Twilight was deep there in the shade of the peach trees, but she could see his face, the hungry, flaring eyes.

"I—I haven't thanked you—yet—for bringing Bo home," she whispered.

"Nell, never mind that," he said in surprise. "If you must—why, wait. I've got to catch up with that cowboy."

"No. Let me thank you now," she whispered, and, stepping closer, she put her arms up, meaning to put them round his neck. But, strangely, her hands got no farther than his breast, and fluttered there to catch hold of the fringe of his buckskin jacket. She felt a heave of his deep chest.

"I—I do thank you—with all my heart," she said softly. "I owe you now—for myself and her—more than I can ever repay."

"Nell, I'm your friend," he replied hurriedly. "Don't talk of repayin' me. Let me go now—after Las Vegas."

"What for?" she queried suddenly.

"I mean to line up beside him—at the bar—or wherever he goes," returned Dale.

"Don't tell me that. I know. You're going straight to meet Beasley."

"Nell, if you hold me up any longer I reckon I'll have to run—or never get to Beasley before that cowboy."

Helen locked her fingers in the fringe of his jacket—leaned closer to him.

"I'll not let you go," she said.

He laughed, and put his great hands over hers.

"What're you sayin', girl? You can't stop me."

"Yes, I can. Dale, I don't want you to risk your life."

He stared at her, and made as if to tear her hands from their hold.

"Listen—please—oh—please!" she implored. "If you go deliberately to kill Beasley—and do it—that will be murder. It's against my religion. I would be unhappy all my life."

"But, child, you'll be ruined all your life if Beasley is not dealt with—as men of his breed are always dealt with in the West," he remonstrated, and in one quick move he had freed himself from her clutching fingers.

Helen, with a move as swift, put her arms round his neck and clasped her hands tight.

"Milt, I'm finding myself," she said. "The other day, when I did—this—you made an excuse for me. I'm not two-faced now."

She meant to keep him from killing Beasley if she sacrificed every last shred of her pride. And she stamped the look of his face on her heart to treasure always. The thrill, the beat of her pulses, almost obstructed her thought of purpose.

"Nell, just now—when you're over-come—rash with feelin's—don't say to me—a word—a—" He broke down huskily.

"My first friend—my—Oh Dale, I know you love me!" she whispered. And she hid her face on his breast there to feel a tremendous tumult.

"Oh, don't you?" she cried in low, smothered voice, as his silence drove her farther on this mad, yet glorious purpose.

"If you need to be told—yes—I reckon I do love you, Nell Rayner," he replied.

"If you kill Beasley I'll never marry you," she said.

"Who's expectin' you to?" he asked with a low, hoarse laugh. "Do you

think you have to marry me to square accounts? This's the only time you ever hurt me, Nell Rayner. I'm ashamed you could think I'd expect you—out of gratitude—"

"Oh—you—you are as dense as the forest where you live," she cried. And then she shut her eyes again, the better to remember that transfiguration of his face, the better to betray herself. "Man—I love you!"

Then it seemed, in the throbbing riot of her senses, that she was lifted and swung into his arms, and handled with a great and terrible tenderness, and hugged and kissed with the hunger and awkwardness of a bear, and held with her feet off the ground, and rendered blind, dizzy, rapturous, and frightened, and utterly torn asunder from her old calm, thinking self.

He put her down—released her.

"Nothin' could have made me so happy as what you said." He finished with a strong sigh of unutterable, wondering joy.

"Then you will not go to—to meet—"

Helen's happy query froze on her lips.

"I've got to go!" he rejoined, with his old, quiet voice. "Hurry in to Bo. An' don't worry. Try to think of things as I taught you up in the woods."

Helen heard his soft, padded foot-falls swiftly pass away. She was left there, alone in the darkening twilight, suddenly cold and stricken, as if turned to stone.

Thus she stood an age-long moment until the flashing truth galvanized her into action. Then she flew in pursuit of Dale. The truth was that, in spite of Dale's early training in the East and the long years of solitude which had made him wonderful in thought and feeling, he had also become a part of this raw, bold, and violent West.

It was quite dark now and she had run quite some distance before she saw Dale's tall, dark form against the yellow light of Turner's saloon.

At the door of the saloon she caught up with Dale.

"Milt—oh—wait!—wait!" she panted.

She heard him curse under his breath as he turned. They were alone in the yellow flare of light. Horses were champing bits and drooping before the rails.

"You go back!" ordered Dale sternly.

"No! Not till—you take me—or carry me!" she replied resolutely.

Then he laid hold of her with ungentle hands. His violence, especially the look on his face, terrified Helen, rendered her weak. But nothing could have shaken her resolve. She felt victory. Her sex, her love, and her presence would be too much for Dale.

As he swung Helen around, the low hum of voices inside the saloon suddenly rose to sharp, hoarse roars, accompanied by a scuffling of feet and crashing of violently sliding chairs or tables. Dale let go of Helen and leaped toward the door. But a silence inside, quicker and stranger than the roar, halted him. Helen's heart contracted, then seemed to cease beating. There was absolutely not a perceptible sound. Even the horses appeared, like Dale, to have turned to statues.

Two thundering shots annihilated this silence. Then quickly came a lighter shot—the smash of glass. Dale ran into the saloon. The horses began to snort, to rear, to pound. A low, muffled murmur terrified Helen even as it drew her. Dashing at the door, she swung it in and entered.

The place was dim, blue-hazed, smelling of smoke. Dale stood just inside the door. On the floor lay two men.

Chairs and tables were overturned. A motley, dark, shirt-sleeved, booted, and belted crowd of men appeared hunched against the opposite wall, with pale, set faces, turned to the bar. Turner, the proprietor, stood at one end, his face livid, his hands aloft and shaking. Carmichael leaned against the middle of the bar. He held a gun low down. It was smoking.

With a gasp Helen flashed her eyes back to Dale. He had seen her—was reaching an arm toward her. Then she saw the man lying almost at her feet. Jeff Mulvey—her uncle's old foreman! His face was awful to behold. A smoking gun lay near his inert hand. The other man had fallen on his face. His garb proclaimed him a Mexican. He was not yet dead.

Then Helen, as she felt Dale's arm encircle her, looked farther, because she could not prevent it—looked on at that strange figure against the bar—this boy who had been such a friend in her hour of need—this frank sweetheart of her sister's.

She saw a man now—wild, white, intense as fire, with some terrible cool kind of deadliness in his mien. His left elbow rested upon the bar, and his hand held a glass of red liquor. The big gun, low down in his other hand, seemed as steady as if it were a fixture.

"Heah's to thet—half-breed Beasley an' his outfit!"

Carmichael drank, while his flaming eyes held the crowd; then with terrible passion he flung the glass at the quivering form of the still living Mexican on the floor.

Helen felt herself slipping. All seemed to darken around her. She could not see Dale, though she knew he held her. Then she fainted.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

One-Man Outfit

CURSING, Las Vegas strode to Dale and pushed him out of the saloon. "—! What're you doin' heah?" he yelled harshly. "Hevn't you got thet girl to think of, Dale? Then do it, you big Indian! Lettin' her run after you heah—riskin' herself thet way! You take care of her an' Bo an' leave this deal to me!"

The cowboy, furious as he was at Dale, yet had keen, swift eyes for the horses near at hand, and the men out in the dim light. Dale lifted the girl into his arms, and, turning without a word, stalked away to disappear in the darkness.

Las Vegas, holding his gun low, returned to the barroom. If there had been any change in the crowd it was slight. The tension had relaxed. Turner no longer stood with hands up.

"You-all go on with your fun," called the cowboy, with a sweep of his gun. "But it'd be risky fer anyone to start leavin'."

With that he backed against the bar, near where the black bottle stood. Turner walked out to begin righting tables and chairs, and presently the crowd, with some caution and suspense, resumed their games and drinking. It was significant that a wide berth lay between them and the door. From time to time Turner served liquor to men who called for it.

Las Vegas leaned back against the bar. After a while he sheathed his gun and reached around for the bottle. He drank with his piercing eyes upon the door. No one entered and no one went

out. The games of chance there and the drinking were not enjoyed.

It was a hard scene—that smoky, long, ill-smelling room, with its dim, yellow lights, and dark, evil faces, with the stealthy-stepping Turner passing to and fro, and the dead Mulvey staring in horrible fixidity at the ceiling, and the Mexican quivering more and more until he shook violently, then lay still, and with the drinking, somber, waiting cowboy, more fiery and more flaming with every drink, listening for a step that did not come.

Time passed and what little change it wrought was in the cowboy. Drink affected him, but he did not become drunk. It seemed that the liquor he drank was consumed by a mounting fire. It was fuel to a driving passion. He grew more sullen, somber, brooding, redder of eye and face, more crouching and restless. At last, when the hour was so late that there was no probability of Beasley appearing, Las Vegas flung himself out of the saloon.

All lights of the village had now been extinguished. The tired horses drooped in the darkness. Las Vegas found his horse and led him away down the road and out a lane to a field where a barn stood dim and dark in the starlight. Morning was not far off. He unsaddled the horse and, turning him loose, went into the barn. Here he seemed familiar with his surroundings, for he found a ladder and climbed to a loft, where he threw himself on the hay.

He rested, but did not sleep. At daylight he went down and brought his horse into the barn. Sunrise found Las Vegas pacing to and fro the short length of the interior, and peering out through wide cracks between the boards. Then during the succeeding couple of hours



he watched the occasional horseman and wagon and herder that passed on into the village.

About the breakfast hour Las Vegas saddled his horse and rode back the way he had come the night before. At Turner's he called for something to eat as well as for whisky. After that he became a listening, watching machine. He drank freely for an hour; then he stopped. He seemed to be drunk, but with a different kind of drunkenness from that usual in drinking men. Savage, fierce, sullen, he was one to avoid. Turner waited on him in evident fear.

At length Las Vegas's condition became such that action was involuntary. He could not stand still nor sit down. Stalking out, he passed the store, where men slouched back to avoid him, and he went down the road, wary and alert, as if he expected a rifle shot from some hidden enemy. Upon his return down that main thoroughfare of the village not a person was to be seen. He went in to Turner's. The proprietor was there at his post, nervous and pale.

"Turner, I reckon I'll bore you next time I run in heah," he said, and stalked out.

He had the stores, the road, the village, to himself; and he patrolled a beat like a sentry watching for an Indian attack.

Toward noon a single man ventured out into the road to accost the cowboy.

"Las Vegas, I'm tellin' you—all the greasers air leavin' the range," he said.

"Howdy, Abel!" replied Las Vegas. "What'n hell you talkin' about?"

The man repeated his information.

"Abe—you heah what Beasley's doin'?"

"Yes. He's with his men—up at the ranch. Reckon he can't put off ridin' down much longer."

Beasley would be forced to meet the enemy who had come out single-handed against him. Long before this hour a braver man would have come to face Las Vegas. Beasley could not hire any gang to bear the brunt of this situation. This was the test by which even his own men must judge him.

"Abe, if thet — greaser don't rustle down heah I'm goin' after him."

"Sure. But don't be in no hurry," replied Abe, walking away.

Las Vegas began his stalking up and down, and his action now was an exaggeration of all his former movements. A rational, ordinary mortal from some Eastern community, happening to meet this red-faced cowboy, would have considered him drunk or crazy. Probably Las Vegas looked both. But all the same he was a marvelously keen and strung and efficient instrument to meet the portending issue.

When he finally turned into Turner's saloon he found no one there. Savagely he pounded on the bar with his gun. He got no response. Then the long-pent-up rage burst. With wild whoops he pulled another gun and shot at the mirror, the lamps. He shot the neck off a bottle and drank till he choked, his neck corded, bulging, and purple. His only slow and deliberate action was the

reloading of his gun. Then he crashed through the doors, and with a wild yell leaped sheer into the saddle, hauling his horse up high and goading him to plunge away.

Men running to the door and windows of the store saw a streak of dust flying down the road. And then they trooped out to see it disappear. The hour of suspense ended for them. Las Vegas had lived up to the code of the West, had dared his man out, had waited far longer than needful to prove that man a coward. Whatever the issue now, Beasley was branded forever. That moment saw the decline of whatever power he had wielded. He and his men might kill the cowboy who had ridden out alone to face him, but that would not change the brand.

The preceding night Beasley had been finishing a late supper at his newly acquired ranch, when Buck Weaver, one of his men, burst in upon him with the news of the death of Mulvey and Pedro.

"Who's in the outfit? How many?"

"It's a one-man outfit, Boss," replied Weaver.

Beasley appeared astounded. He and his men had prepared to meet the friends of the girl whose property he had taken over, and because of the superiority of his own force he had anticipated no bloody or extended feud.

"One man!" he ejaculated.

"Yep. Thet cowboy Las Vegas. An', Boss, he turns out to be a gun slinger from Texas. I was in Turner's. Hed jest happened to step in the other room when Las Vegas come bustin' in on his hoss an' jumped off. Fust thing he called Jeff an' Pedro. They both showed yaller. An' then, damn if thet cowboy didn't turn his back on them an' went to the

bar fer a drink. But he was lookin' in the mirror an' when Jeff an' Pedro went fer their guns why he whirled quick as lightnin' an' bored them both. I sneaked out an'—"

"Why didn't you bore him?" roared Beasley.

"I ain't takin' shots at any feller from behind doors. An' as fer meetin' Las Vegas—excoose me, Boss! I've still a hankerin' fer sunshine an' red liquor. Besides, I ain't got nothin' ag'in' Las Vegas. If he's rustled over here at the head of a crowd to put us off I'd fight, jest as we'd all fight. But you see we figgered wrong. It's between you an' Las Vegas! You oughter seen him throw thet hunter Dale out of Turner's."

"Dale! Did he come?"

"He got there just after the cowboy plugged Jeff. An' thet big-eyed girl, she came runnin' in, too. An' she keeled over in Dale's arms. Las Vegas shoved him out—cussed him so hard we all heerd. So, Beasley, there ain't no fight comin' off as we figgered on."

And grim, sardonic, almost scornful, indeed, were the words of Buck Weaver. This rider had once worked for Al Auchincloss and had deserted to Beasley under Mulvey's leadership. Mulvey was dead and the situation was vastly changed.

Beasley gave Weaver a dark, lowering glance, and waved him away. From the door Weaver sent back a doubtful, scrutinizing gaze, then slouched out. That gaze Beasley had not encountered before.

It meant, as Weaver's cronies meant, as Beasley's long-faithful riders, and the people of the range, and as the spirit of the West meant, that Beasley was expected to march down into the village to face his single foe.

But Beasley did not go. Instead he paced to and fro the length of Helen Rayner's long sitting-room with the nervous energy of a man who could not rest. Many times he hesitated, and at others he made sudden movements toward the door, only to halt. Long after midnight he went to bed, but not to sleep. He tossed and rolled all night, and at dawn arose, gloomy and irritable.

He cursed the Mexican serving-women who showed their displeasure at his authority. And to his amazement and rage not one of his men came to the house. He waited and waited. Then he stalked off to the corrals and stables, carrying a rifle with him. The men were there, in a group that dispersed somewhat at his advent. Not a Mexican was in sight.

Beasley ordered the horses to be saddled and all hands to go down into the village with him. That order was disobeyed. Beasley stormed and raged. His riders sat or lounged, with lowered faces. An unspoken hostility seemed present. Those who had been longest with him were least distant and strange, but still they did not obey. At length Beasley roared for his Mexicans.

"Boss, we gotta tell you thet every greaser on the ranch has sloped—gone these two hours—on the way to Magdalena," said Buck Weaver.

Of all these sudden-uprising perplexities this latest was the most astounding. Beasley cursed with his questioning wonder.

"Boss, they was sure scared of thet gun-slingin' cowboy from Texas," replied Weaver imperturbably.

Beasley's dark, swarthy face changed its hue. One of the men came out of a corral leading Beasley's saddled and bridled horse. This fellow dropped the

bridle and sat down among his comrades without a word. No one spoke. The presence of the horse was significant. With a snarling, muttered curse, Beasley took up his rifle and strode back to the ranch house.

In his rage and passion he did not realize what his men had known for hours—that if he had stood any chance at all for their respect as well as for his life the hour was long past.

Beasley avoided the open paths to the house, and when he got there he nervously poured out a drink. Evidently something in the fiery liquor frightened him, for he threw the bottle aside. It was as if that bottle contained a courage which was false.

Again he paced the long sitting-room, growing more and more wrought-up as evidently he grew familiar with the singular state of affairs. Twice the pale serving-woman called him to dinner.

The dining-room was light and pleasant, and the meal, fragrant and steaming, was ready for him. But the women had disappeared. Beasley seated himself—spread out his big hands on the table.

Then a slight rustle—a clink of spur—startled him. He twisted his head.

"Howdy, Beasley!" said Las Vegas, who had appeared as if by magic.

Beasley's frame seemed to swell as if a flood had been loosed in his veins. Sweat drops stood out on his pallid face.

"What — you — want?" he asked huskily.

"Wal now, my boss, Miss Helen, says, seein' I am foreman heah, thet it'd be nice an' proper fer me to drop in an' eat with you—the last time!" replied the cowboy.

Beasley's reply was loud, incoherent, hoarse.

Las Vegas seated himself across from Beasley.

"Eat or not, it's shore all the same to me," said Las Vegas, and he began to load his plate with his left hand. His right hand rested very lightly, with just the tips of his vibrating fingers on the edge of the table; and he never for the slightest fraction of a second took his piercing eyes off Beasley.

"It shore roils up my blood to see you sittin' there—thinkin' you've put my boss, Miss Helen, off this ranch," began Las Vegas softly. And then he helped himself leisurely to food and drink.

"In my day I've shore stacked up against a lot of outlaws, thieves, rustlers, an' sich-like, but fer an out-an'-out dirty low-down skunk, you shore take the dough! I'm goin' to kill you in a minit or so, jest as soon as you move one of them dirty paws of yourn. But I hope you'll be polite an' let me saw a few words. I'll never be happy again if you don't.

"Of all the — yaller dogs I ever seen, you're the worst! I was thinkin' last night mebbe you'd come down an' meet me like a man, so's I could wash my hands ever afterward without gettin' sick to my stummick. But you didn't come. Beasley, I'm so ashamed of myself thet I gotta call you—when I ought to bore you, thet—I ain't even second cousin to my old self when I rode fer Chisholm. It don't mean nuthin' to you to call you liar! robber! blackleg! a sneakin' coyote! an' a cheat thet hires others to do his dirty work! By Gawd!—"

"Carmichael, gifme a word in," hoarsely broke out Beasley. "You're right, it won't do no good to call me. But let's talk. I'll buy you off. Ten thousand dollars—"

"Haw! Haw! Haw!" roared Las Vegas. He was as tense as a strung cord and his face possessed a singular pale radiance. His right hand began to quiver more and more.

"I'll—double—it!" panted Beasley. "I'll—make over—half the ranch—all the stock—"

"Swaller thet!" yelled Las Vegas with terrible strident ferocity.

"Listen—man! I take—it back! I'll give up—Auchincloss's ranch!" Beasley was now a shaking, whispering, frenzied man, ghastly white, with rolling eyes.

Las Vegas's left fist pounded hard on the table.

"God damn you, come on!" he thundered.

Then Beasley, with desperate, frantic action, jerked for his gun.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

Return to Paradise

FOR Helen Rayner that brief, dark period of expulsion from her home had become a thing of the past, almost forgotten.

Two months had flown by on the wings of love and work and the joy of finding her place there in the West. All her old men had been only too glad of the opportunity to come back to her, and under Dale and Roy Beeman a different and prosperous order marked the life of the ranch.

Helen had made changes in the house by altering the arrangement of rooms and adding a new section. Only once had she ventured into the old dining-room where Las Vegas Carmichael had sat down to that fatal dinner for

Beasley. She made a storeroom of it, and a place she would never again enter.

Helen was happy, almost too happy, she thought, and therefore made more than needful of the several bitter drops in her sweet cup of life. Carmichael had ridden out of Pine, ostensibly on the trail of the Mexicans who had executed Beasley's commands. The last seen of him had been reported from Show Down, where he had appeared red-eyed and dangerous, like a hound on a scent. Then two months had flown by without a word.

Dale had shaken his head doubtfully when interrogated about the cowboy's absence. It would be just like Las Vegas never to be heard of again. Also it would be more like him to remain away until all trace of his drunken, savage spell had departed from him and had been forgotten by his friends.

Bo took his disappearance apparently less to heart than Helen. But Bo grew more restless, wilder, and more willful than ever. Helen thought she guessed Bo's secret, and once she ventured a hint concerning Carmichael's return.

"If Tom doesn't come back pretty soon I'll marry Milt Dale," retorted Bo tauntingly.

This fired Helen's cheeks with red. "But, child," she protested, half angry, half grave, "Milt and I are engaged."

"Sure. Only you're so slow. There's many a slip—you know."

"Bo, I tell you Tom will come back," replied Helen earnestly. "I feel it. There was something fine in that cowboy. He understood me better than you or Milt, either. And he was perfectly wild in love with you."

"Oh! Was he?"

"Much more than you deserved."

Then occurred one of Bo's sweet, bewildering, unexpected transformations.

"Oh, Nell, I know that. You just watch me if I ever get another chance at him! Then—maybe he'd never drink again!"

"Bo, be happy—and be good. Don't ride off any more—don't tease the boys. It'll all come right in the end."

Bo recovered her equanimity quickly enough.

"Humph! You can afford to be cheerful. You've got a man who can't live when you're out of his sight. He's like a fish on dry land. And you—why, once you were an old pessimist!"

Bo was not to be consoled or changed. Helen could only sigh and pray that her convictions would be verified.

The first day of July brought an early thunderstorm, just at sunrise. It roared and flared and rolled away, leaving a gorgeous golden cloud pageant in the sky and a fresh, sweetly smelling, glistening green range that delighted Helen's eye.

Birds were twittering in the arbors and bees were humming in the flowers. From the fields down along the brook came a blended song of swamp blackbird and meadowlark. A clarion-voiced burro split the air with his coarse and homely bray. The sheep were bleating, and a soft *baa* of little lambs came sweetly to Helen's ears.

She went her usual rounds with more than usual zest and thrill. Everywhere was color, activity, life. The wind swept warm and pine-scented down from the mountain heights, now black and bold, and the great green slopes seemed to call to her.

At that very moment she came suddenly upon Dale, in his shirt sleeves, dusty and hot, standing motionless,

gazing at the distant mountains. Helen's greeting startled him.

"I—I was just looking away yonder," he said, smiling. She thrilled at the clear, wonderful light of his eyes.

"So was I—a moment ago," she replied wistfully. "Do you miss the forest—very much?"

"Nell, I miss nothing. But I'd like to ride with you under the pines once more."

"We'll go," she cried.

"When?" he asked eagerly.

"Oh—soon!" And then with flushed face and downcast eyes she passed on. For long Helen had cherished a fond hope that she might be married in Paradise Park, where she had fallen in love with Dale and had realized herself. But she had kept that hope secret. Dale's eager tone, his flashing eyes, had made her feel that her secret was there in her telltale face.

As she entered the lane leading to the house she encountered one of the new stable boys driving a pack mule.

"Jim, whose pack is that?" she asked.

"Ma'am, I dunno, but I heard him tell Roy he reckoned his name was mud," replied the boy, smiling.

Helen's heart gave a quick throb. That sounded like Las Vegas. She hurried on, and upon entering the courtyard she espied Roy Beeman holding the halter of a beautiful, wild-looking mustang. There was another horse with another man, who was in the act of dismounting on the far side. When he stepped into better view Helen recognized Las Vegas. And he saw her at the same instant.

"Miss Helen, I shore am glad to see you," he said, standing bareheaded before her, the same young, frank-faced cowboy she had seen first from the train.

"Tom!" she exclaimed, and offered her hands.

He wrung them hard while he looked at her. The swift woman's glance Helen gave in return seemed to drive something dark and doubtful out of her heart. This was the same boy she had known—whom she had liked so well—who had won her sister's love. Helen imagined facing him thus was like awakening from a vague nightmare of doubt.

Carmichael's face was clean, fresh, young, with its healthy tan; it wore the old glad smile, cool, easy, and natural; his eyes were like Dale's—penetrating, clear as crystal, without a shadow. Wherever he had been, whatever he had done during that long absence, he had returned long separated from that wild and savage character she could now forget. Perhaps there would never again be call for it.

"How's my girl?" he asked, just as naturally as if he had been gone a few days on some errand of his employer's.

"Bo? Oh, she's well—fine. I—I rather think she'll be glad to see you," replied Helen warmly.

"An' how's thet big Indian, Dale?" he drawled.

"Well, too—I'm sure."

"Reckon I got back heah in time to see you-all married?"

"I—I assure you I—no one around here has been married yet," replied Helen with a blush.

"Thet shore is fine. Was some worried," he said lazily. "I've been chasin' wild hosses over in New Mexico, an' I got after this heah blue roan. He kept me chasin' him fer a spell. I've fetched him back for Bo."

Helen looked at the mustang Roy was holding, to be instantly delighted. He was a roan almost blue in color,

neither large nor heavy, but powerfully built, clean-limbed, and racy, with a long mane and tail, black as coal, and a beautiful head that made Helen love him at once.

"Well, I'm jealous," declared Helen archly. "I never did see such a pony."

"I reckoned you'd never ride any hoss but Ranger," said Las Vegas.

"No, I never will. But I can be jealous, anyhow, can't I?"

"Shore. An' I reckon if you say you're goin' to have him—wal, Bo'd be funny," he drawled.

"I reckon she would be funny," retorted Helen. She was so happy that she imitated his speech. She wanted to hug him. It was too good to be true—the return of this cowboy. He understood her. He had come back with nothing that could alienate her. He had apparently forgotten the terrible role he had accepted and the doom he had meted out to her enemies. That moment was wonderful for Helen in its revelation of the strange significance of the West as embodied in this cowboy. He was great. But he did not know that.

Then the door of the living-room opened, and a sweet, high voice pealed out:

"Roy! Oh, what a mustang! Whose is he?"

"Wal, Bo, if all I hear is so he belongs to you," replied Roy with a huge grin.

Bo appeared in the door. She stepped out upon the porch. She saw the cowboy. The excited flash of her pretty face vanished as she paled.

"Bo, I shore am glad to see you," drawled Las Vegas, as he stepped forward, sombrero in hand. Helen could not see any sign of confusion in him. But, indeed, she saw gladness. Then

she expected to behold Bo run right into the cowboy's arms. It appeared, however, that she was doomed to disappointment.

"Tom, I'm glad to see you," she replied.

They shook hands as old friends.

"You're lookin' right fine," he said.

"Oh, I'm well. And how have you been these six months?" she queried.

"Reckon I thought it was longer," he drawled. "Wal, I'm pretty tip-top now, but I was laid up with heart trouble for a spell."

"Heart trouble?" she echoed dubiously.

"Shore—I ate too much over heah in New Mexico."

"It's no news to me—where your heart's located," laughed Bo. Then she ran off the porch to see the blue mustang. She walked round and round him, clasping her hands in sheer delight.

"Bo, he's a plumb dandy," said Roy. "Never seen a prettier hoss. He'll run like a streak. An' he's got good eyes. He'll be a pet some day. But I reckon he'll always be spunky."

Bo ventured to step closer, and at last got a hand on the mustang, and then another. She smoothed his quivering neck and called softly to him, until he submitted to her hold.

"What's his name?" she asked.

"Blue somethin' or other," replied Roy.

"Tom, has my new mustang a name?" asked Bo, turning to the cowboy.

"Shore."

"What then?"

"Wal, I named him Blue-Bo," answered Las Vegas with a smile.

"Blue-Boy?"

"Nope. He's named after you. An' I

chased him, roped him, broke him all myself."

"Very well. Blue-Bo he is, then. And he's a wonderful darling horse. Oh, Nell, just look at him! Tom, I can't thank you enough."

"Reckon I don't want any thanks," drawled the cowboy. "But see heah, Bo, you shore got to live up to conditions before you ride him."

"What!" exclaimed Bo, who was startled by his slow, cool, meaning tone of voice.

"Bo Rayner," drawled Las Vegas, "thet blue mustang will be yours, an' you can ride him—when you're Mrs. Tom Carmichael!"

Never had he spoken a softer, more drawling speech, nor gazed at Bo more mildly. Roy seemed thunderstruck. Helen endeavored heroically to restrain her delicious, bursting glee.

Bo's wide eyes stared at her lover—darkened—dilated. Suddenly she left the mustang to confront the cowboy where he lounged on the porch steps.

"Do you mean that?" she cried.

"Shore do."

"Bah! It's only a magnificent bluff," she retorted. "You're only in fun. It's your—your darned nerve!"

"Why, Bo," began Las Vegas reproachfully. "You shore know I'm not the four-flusher kind. Never got away with a bluff in my life! An' I'm jest in daid earnest aboot this heah."

All the same, signs were not wanting in his mobile face that he was almost unable to restrain his mirth.

Helen realized then that Bo saw through the cowboy.

"It is a bluff and I call you!" declared Bo ringingly.

Las Vegas suddenly awoke to consequences. He essayed to speak, but she was so wonderful then, so white

and blazing-eyed, that he was stricken mute.

"I'll ride Blue-Bo this afternoon," deliberately stated the girl.

Las Vegas seemed about to collapse.

"Very well, you can make me Mrs. Tom Carmichael today—this morning—just before dinner. Go get a preacher to marry us—and make yourself look a more presentable bridegroom—*unless it was only a bluff!*"

Her imperiousness changed as the tremendous portent of her words seemed to make Las Vegas a blank, stone image of a man. With a wild-rose color suffusing her face, she swiftly kissed him and flashed away into the house. Her laugh pealed back, and it thrilled Helen, so deep and strange was it for the willful sister, so wild and merry and full of joy.

It was then that Roy Beeman recovered from his paralysis, to let out such a roar of mirth as to frighten the horses. Helen was laughing, and crying, too, but laughing mostly. Las Vegas Carmichael was a sight for the gods to behold. Bo's kiss had unclamped what had bound him. The sudden truth, undeniable, insupportable, glorious, made him a madman.

"Bluff—she called me—ride Blue-Bo s'afternoon!" he raved, reaching wildly for Helen. "Mrs.—Tom—Carmichael—before dinner — preacher — presentable bridegroom! Aw! I'm drunk again! I—who swore off—forever!"

"No, Tom, you're just happy," said Helen.

Between her and Roy the cowboy was at length persuaded to accept the situation and to see his wonderful opportunity.

"Now—now, Miss Helen—what'd Bo mean by pre-presentable bridegroom? Presents? Lord, I'm clean busted flat!"

"She meant you must dress up in your best, of course," replied Helen.

"Where 'n earth will I get a preacher? Show Down's forty miles. Can't ride there in time. Roy, I've gotta have a preacher—life or death deal fer me."

"Wal, old man, if you'll brace up I'll marry you to Bo," said Roy with his glad grin.

"Aw!" gasped Las Vegas, as if at the coming of a sudden beautiful hope.

"Tom, I'm a preacher," replied Roy, now earnestly. "You didn't know thet, but I am. An' I can marry you an' Bo as good as anyone, an' tighter'n most."

Las Vegas reached for his friend as a drowning man might have reached for solid rock.

"Roy, can you really marry them—with my Bible—and the service of my church?" asked Helen, a happy hope flushing her face.

"Wal, indeed I can. I've married more'n one couple whose religion wasn't mine."

"B-b-before—d-d-dinner!" burst out Las Vegas, like a stuttering idiot.

"I reckon. Come on, now, an' make yourself pre-sent-tible," said Roy. "Miss Helen, you tell Bo thet it's all settled."

He picked up the halter on the blue mustang and turned away toward the corrals. Las Vegas put the bridle of his horse over his arm, and seemed to be following in a trance, with his dazed, rapt face held high.

"Bring Dale," called Helen, softly after them.

So it came about as naturally as it was wonderful that Bo rode the blue mustang before the afternoon ended.

Las Vegas disobeyed his first orders from Mrs. Tom Carmichael and rode out after her toward the green-rising range. Helen seemed impelled to fol-

low. She did not need to ask Dale the second time. They rode swiftly, but never caught up with Bo and Las Vegas, whose riding resembled their happiness.

Dale read Helen's mind, or else his own thoughts were in harmony with hers, for he always seemed to speak what she was thinking. And as they rode homeward he asked her in his quiet way if they could not spare a few days to visit his old camp.

"And take Bo—and Tom? Oh, of all things I'd like to," she replied.

"Yes—an' Roy, too," added Dale significantly.

"Of course," said Helen lightly, as if she had not caught his meaning. But she turned her eyes away, while her heart thumped disgracefully and all her body was aglow. "Will Tom and Bo go?"

"It was Tom who got me to ask you," replied Dale. "John an' Hal can look after the men while we're gone."

"Oh—so Tom put it in your head? I guess—maybe—I won't go."

"It is always in my mind, Nell," he said with his slow seriousness. "I'm goin' to work all my life for you. But I'll want to an' need to go back to the woods often. An' if you ever stoop to marry me—an' make me the richest of men—you'll have to marry me up there where I fell in love with you."

"Ah! Did Las Vegas Tom Carmichael say that, too?" inquired Helen softly.

"Nell, do you want to know what Las Vegas said?"

"By all means."

"He said this—an' not an hour ago. 'Milt, old hoss, let me give you a hunch. I'm a man of family now—an' I've been a devil with the wimmen in my day. I can see through 'em. Don't marry Nell Rayner in or near the house where

I killed Beasley. She'd remember. An' don't let her remember that day. Go off into the woods. Paradise Park! Bo an' me will go with you."

Helen gave him her hand, while they walked the horses homeward in the long sunset shadows. In the fullness of that happy hour she had time for a grateful wonder at the keen penetration of the cowboy Carmichael. Dale had saved her life, but it was Las Vegas who had saved her happiness.

Not many days later, when again the afternoon shadows were slanting low, Helen rode out upon the promontory where the dim trail zigzagged far above Paradise Park.

Roy was singing as he drove the pack burros down the slope; Bo and Las Vegas were trying to ride the trail two abreast, so they could hold hands; Dale had dismounted to stand beside Helen's horse, as she gazed down the shaggy black slopes to the beautiful wild park with its gray meadows and shining ribbons of brooks.

It was July, and there were no golden-red glorious flames and blazes of color such as lingered in Helen's memory. Black spruce slopes and green pines and white streaks of aspens and lacy waterfall of foam and dark out-croppings of rock—these colors and forms greeted her gaze with all the old enchantment. Wildness, beauty, and loneliness were there, the same as ever, immutable, like the spirit of those heights.

Helen would have lingered longer, but the others called, and Ranger impatiently snorted his sense of the grass and water far below. And she knew that when she climbed there again to the wide outlook she would be another woman.

"Nell, come on," said Dale, as he led on. "It's better to look up."

The sun had just sunk behind the ragged fringe of mountain rim when those three strong and efficient men of the open had pitched camp and had prepared a bountiful supper.

Then Roy Beeman took out the little worn Bible which Helen had given him to use when he married Bo, and as he opened it a light changed his dark face.

"Come, Helen an' Dale," he said.

They arose to stand before him. And he married them there under the great, stately pines, with the fragrant blue smoke curling upward, and the wind singing through the branches, while the waterfall murmured its low, soft, dreamy music, and from the dark slope came the wild, lonely cry of a wolf.

"Let us pray," said Roy, as he closed the Bible and knelt with them.

"There is only one God, an' Him I beseech in my humble office for the woman an' man I have just wedded in holy bonds. Bless them an' watch them an' keep them through all the comin' years. Bless the sons of this strong man of the woods an' make them like him, with love an' understandin' of the source from which life comes. Bless the daughters of this woman an' send with them more of her love an' soul, which must be the softenin' an' the salvation of the hard West. O Lord, blaze the dim, dark trail for them through the unknown forest of life! O Lord, lead the way across the naked range of the future no mortal knows! We ask in Thy name! Amen."

When the preacher stood up again and raised the couple from their kneeling posture, it seemed that a grave and solemn personage had left him. This young man was again the dark-faced, clear-eyed Roy, droll and dry, with the enigmatic smile on his lips.

"Mrs. Dale," he said, taking her hands, "I wish you joy. An' now, after this here, my crownin' service in your behalf—I reckon I'll claim a reward."

Then he kissed her. Bo came next with her warm and loving felicitations, and the cowboy, with characteristic action, also made at Helen.

"Nell, shore it's the only chance I'll ever hâve to kiss you," he drawled. "Because when this heah big Indian once finds out what kissin' is—!"

Las Vegas then proved how swift and hearty he could be upon occasions. All this left Helen red and confused and unutterably happy. She appreciated Dale's state. His eyes reflected the precious treasure which manifestly he saw, but realization of ownership had not yet become demonstrable.

Then with gay speech and happy laugh and silent look these five partook of the supper. When it was finished Roy made known his intention to leave. They all protested and coaxed, but to no avail. He only laughed and went on saddling his horse.

"Roy, please stay," implored Helen. "The day's almost ended. You're tired." "Nope. I'll never be no third party when there's only two."

"But there are four of us."

"Didn't I just make you an' Dale one? An', Mrs. Dale, you forget I've been married more'n once."

Helen found herself confronted by an unanswerable side of the argument. Las Vegas rolled on the grass in his mirth. Dale looked strange.

"Roy, then that's why you're so nice," said Bo, with a little devil in her eyes. "Do you know I had my mind made up if Tom hadn't come around I was going to make up to you, Roy—I sure was. What number wife would I have been?"

Roy looked mightily embarrassed. And the laugh was on him. He did not face them again until he had mounted.

"Las Vegas, I've done my best for you—hitched you to thet blue-eyed girl the best I know how," he declared. "But I shore ain't guaranteein' nothin'. You'd better build a corral for her."

"Why, Roy, you shore don't savvy the way to break these wild ones," drawled Las Vegas. "Bo will be eatin' out of my hand in about a week."

Bo's blue eyes expressed an eloquent doubt as to this extraordinary claim.

"Good-by, friends," said Roy, and rode away to disappear in the spruces.

Thereupon Bo and Las Vegas forgot Roy, and Dale and Helen, the camp chores to be done, and everything else except themselves. Helen's first wifely duty was to insist that she should and could and would help her husband with the work of cleaning up after the sumptuous supper.

Before they had finished a sound startled them. It came from Roy, evidently high on the darkening slope, and was a long, mellow pealing halloo, that rang on the cool air, burst the dreamy silence, and rapped across from slope to slope and cliff to cliff, to lose its power and die away hauntingly in the distant recesses.

Dale shook his head as if he did not care to attempt a reply to that beautiful call. Silence once again enfolded the part, and twilight seemed to be born of the air, drifting downward.

"Nell, do you miss anythin'?" asked Dale.

"No. Nothing in all the world," she murmured. "I am happier than I ever dared pray to be."

"I don't mean people or things. I mean my pets."

"Ah! I had forgotten. Milt, where are they?"

"Gone back to the wild," he said. "They had to live in my absence. An' I've been away long."

Just then the brooding silence, with its soft murmur of falling water and faint sigh of wind in the pines, was broken by a piercing scream, high, quivering, like that of a woman in exquisite agony.

"That's Tom!" exclaimed Dale.

"Oh—I was so—so frightened!" whispered Helen.

Bo came running, with Las Vegas at her heels.

"Milt, that was your tame cougar," cried Bo excitedly. "Oh, I'll never forget him! I'll hear those cries in my dreams!"

"Yes, it was Tom," said Dale thoughtfully. "But I never heard him cry just like that."

"Oh, call him in!"

Dale whistled and called, but Tom did not come. Then the hunter stalked off in the gloom to call from different points under the slope. After a while he returned without the cougar. And at that moment, from far up the dark ravine, drifted down the same wild cry, only changed by distance, strange and tragic in its meaning.

"He scented us. He remembers. But he'll never come back," said Dale.

In the starlight, under the wide-gnarled pines, sighing low with the wind, Helen sat with Dale on the old stone that an avalanche of a million years past had flung from the rampart above to serve as camp table and bench for lovers in the wilderness; the sweet scent of spruce mingled with the fragrance of wood-smoke blown in their faces. How white the stars, and calm

and true! How they blazed their single task! A coyote yelped off on the south slope, dark now as midnight. A bit of weathered rock rolled and tapped from shelf to shelf. And the wind moaned.

Helen felt all the sadness and mystery and nobility of this lonely fastness, and full on her heart rested the supreme consciousness that all would some day be well with the troubled world beyond.

"Nell, I'll homestead this park," said Dale. "Then it'll always be ours."

"Homestead! What's that?" murmured Helen, dreamily. The word sounded sweet.

"The government will give land to men who locate an' build," replied Dale. "We'll run up a log cabin."

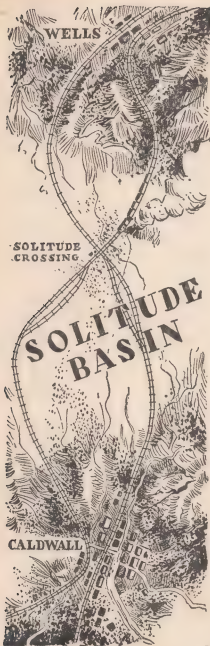
"And come here often. Paradise Park!" whispered Helen.

Dale's first kisses were on her lips then, hard and cool and clean, like the life of the man, singularly exalting to her, completing her woman's strange and unutterable joy of the hour, and rendering her mute.

Bo's melodious laugh, and her voice with its old mockery of torment, drifted slowly on the night breeze. And the cowboy's "Aw, Bo," drawing his reproach and longing, was all that the tranquil, waiting silence needed.

Paradise Park was living again one of its romances. Love was no stranger to that lonely fastness. Helen heard in the whisper of the wind through the pine the old-earth story, beautiful, ever new, and yet eternal. She thrilled to her depths. The star-pointed spruces stood up black and clear against the noble stars. All that vast solitude breathed and waited, charged full with its secret, ready to reveal itself to her tremulous soul.

THE END



SOLITUDE BASIN

By John E. Kelly

"BULL JIM" MARSH, Division Super for the Pacific Eastern, does his best—or worst—to keep the new line out of Solitude Basin, but Dan Kimbrough, S. L. & S. D. construction engineer, has a trick up his sleeve to match each one of Bull Jim's. A ZGWM Old West railroading original.

THE first white man to cross the Basin cursed it. He damned the heat, the fleas cavorting within his armor, the stinging alkali dust that cracked lips and eyelids. On his sheepskin map the Spanish Captain marked the wasteland *Soledad* and headed southwest toward San Diego.

Later comers shared his sentiments, changing only the spelling. Engine crews on the Pacific Eastern rubbed coal dust around their eyes to lessen the glare of the barren sands, stuffed their caps with wet rags against the furnace blast of the slipstream. "Bull Jim" Marsh, who built the railroad and remained as Superintendent of its Mid-Mountain Division, toned down his customary epithets for a traveling preacher.

"No use huntin' the devil in Solitude

Basin, Rev'rend," Marsh said. "Old Nick's gone to hell to get cool."

For all that, the Super was as jealous of his territory as a biddy hen with day-old chicks. From Caldwell in the high country west of the sink clear to Wells in the eastern foothills, Marsh was king of steel and bound he'd stay so. The division point of Caldwell was cool—nights and winters—but Bull Jim was boiling as he listened to his chief clerk, Dex Manlon.

"That new outfit's headin' here sure enough, Bull," Manlon said, entering the Super's office on the second floor of the depot. "A coupla desert rats told me this mornin' they seen surveyors not more'n a dozen miles north of town."

Marsh's reply blistered the ceiling. "Survey and be damned!" he cried when he had blown off a full head of steam. "Let 'em build, too! But they'll never turn a wheel in my territory."

Lunging to his feet, he stalked to the window. From Caldwell's tallest building the Super's angry gaze carried over the freight shed and sidings to the dust-blurred horizon. He shook his huge gray head in frustration.

"Can't make out a thing, with that Siwash norther stirrin' up the dust devils," Bull Jim complained. "I'll ride out in the mornin' and have a look-see."

A movement in the street below caught Marsh's eye. A stranger swung out of his saddle at the hitching-rack before the Mountain King Hotel and headed across the ruts for the depot. Belligerent and suspicious, the Super sized him up.

Dry ranchers from the Mormon settlements up-country wore such belted guns and spurred boots. But the Saints sported full beards, not smooth tanned

cheeks and trim mustaches. The newcomer's alert, purposeful stride was no kin to the patient shuffle of a desert prospector. A hunch gripped Marsh—he was going to be saved that morning ride. He flung himself into his chair as quick steps beat on the warped stairs.

The stranger stood on the threshold, a brown-haired, gray-eyed man in his early thirties, above middle height, whose wiry, proportioned body was stronger than it looked. He smiled at Manlon.

"Superintendent Marsh?"

The citified accent raised the Supers' hackles. *Damn tenderfoot!*

The clerk cocked a thumb at his boss. "Bull Jim hisself," he replied tersely.

The other walked toward Marsh's desk, a hand extended. "Dan Kimbrough," he introduced himself, "construction engineer for the Salt Lake & San Diego."

"Where you'll never be," Bull Jim grunted. He ignored the outstretched hand.

"Oh?" asked Kimbrough, puzzled but still pleasant. "I come to propose a deal that would help us get there quicker."

Marsh's scowl deepened. "We don't lend equipment," he snapped.

"We've plenty of our own," the younger man assured him. He walked over to a sketch map on the wall. "We're building from Salt Lake down to Caldwell. But to get through the mountains, we've got to make an offset eastward from here. That means paralleling your line to Wells, unless we can make a deal and get trackage rights over your rails."

"Nix," barked Marsh. "Not interested!"

"But we'd pay mileage rates," protested Kimbrough. "And it wouldn't

disturb your schedules. You're only running a passenger twice a week and two or three daily freights."

"Nosey, ain't you?" demanded Bull Jim. "Lissen, young feller me lad, the Pacific Eastern's jammed coupler to coupler with its own traffic, as far as you ever runnin' on our rails is concerned." He rose to end the interview.

Kimbrough did not budge. "It's a shame to duplicate facilities."

"Short of money?" Marsh jeered.

"No," returned Kimbrough. "But our franchise calls for so many miles completed every six months, and a mileage deal with you would lessen the strain."

"That's no skin off my nose," Bull Jim retorted.

"Very well, then." Kimbrough spoke resignedly. "If you won't co-operate, we'll build from Caldwell to Wells ourselves." He traced a route on the map. "I've looked over the ground. You got first choice of the passes. We'll leave Caldwell this way, to the north, but the only entrance to Wells is over on the south. So we'll cross your rails somewhere in the Basin. I figure about where your passing-track is. You'll have no objection to signing the usual crossing agreement?"

Marsh temporized. "I'll hafta write our President, Eph Fillman, down to 'Frisco, 'fore I put my John Henry to any sech writin'," he declared, his blunt features overcast by a sly expression.

Kimbrough studied Pacific Eastern's man for a long moment.

"Do that," he said evenly. "I'll be back for your answer." His spurs jingled diminuendo on the stairs.

"What's the idea of holdin' out on the crossin' agreement, Bull?" his clerk asked. "They gotta right to cross us, oncet anyhow."

Marsh's sly expression deepened. "You heerd what he let out about their franchise," he said. "I figure I got Mister Tenderfoot where the hair is mighty short."

Kimbrough stamped across to the Mountain King, flinging the horse wrangler four bits. "Feed my horse while I feed myself," he instructed the oldster.

The hostler pocketed the coin. "Shore will," he grinned. "The best in Caldwell. An' a bait of clover from me private patch under the water tank."

Kimbrough chewed his way doggedly through steer steak and his problem, equally tough. Accustomed to the free and easy good fellowship of construction men, Dan was nonplused by Marsh's dog-in-the-manger attitude. He put no stock in Bull Jim's writing to headquarters. That was a plain stall. Pacific Eastern was out to block the S. L. & S. D.; a railroad war was shaping up.

Time was on Marsh's side. If Kimbrough didn't reach Wells on schedule, the new road's money would be shut off, and Pacific Eastern could pick the line up for peanuts in the bankruptcy court. Dan took a last slap at the circling flies and strode from the dining-room, his face set in hard lines.

Bull Jim's neglected desk gathered cinders. He stood for hours at the north window, glaring and gloating by turns. The man-made dust cloud on the horizon drew nearer. Close behind the surveyors came the construction gangs, antlike in the distance, wheeling ballast, laying crossties, toting rails. The wind brought the faint hoots of the dinky engines hauling the work trains. Day by day the figures grew larger, the

picture clearer. The old railroad builder in Marsh accorded grudging admiration to Kimbrough's efficiency. His scheming nature rejoiced; the more Kimbrough built, the more Pacific Eastern would get cheap.

"T'ain't fitten for me to show myself out there, Dex." The Super's outsize hand gestured through the open window. "The tenderfoot might think he's got me worried. But you ride herd on him, like you was jest pirootin' around in your spare time. Keep your eye peeled; I wanta know everythin' goin' on."

Later, Manlon's first report brought a derisive hoot from his boss.

"Kimbrough's usin' white work gangs, not Chinks like the Pacific Eastern," the clerk said.

"He'll never cross our steel," chortled Bull Jim. "Wait 'til them rednecks hit the Basin heat! They'll wilt like snowdrifts in a Chinook wind."

As Kimbrough planned, the Salt Lake & San Diego reached Caldwell between paydays. Broke and thirsty gandy dancers found "No Advances" chalked on the locked pay car, cash down demanded by hard-eyed dive keepers along skid row—and stayed thirsty. Mad and sober, they ran up a temporary depot shack in record time and headed east down a canyon, moving with clockwork precision.

Starting from his window, Marsh had caught no glimpse of Kimbrough.

"Unmannerly pup!" the frustrated Super barked to his clerk. "High-tailin' it when he knew I was expectin' him. He's a-hidin' somethin' and I aim to find out what. I'll go myself; you ain't been nosin' out much lately, Dex."

Marsh advanced confidently upon the

spindly bookkeeper Kimbrough had left in charge of the S. L. & S. D. depot. The young fellow was no wider'n a tule he'd spill his guts easy when Bull Jim got to working on him!

The bookkeeper looked up, closing his ledgers at the stranger's approach. "We ain't sellin' tickets yet, Mister."

"Just come by to leave a bait of seegars for my old pard Abel Kimbrough," Marsh explained heartily. He pawed a handful of stogies from a breast pocket. "Help yourself, too, but I got somethin' better you'll enjoy first. Old Jim's tonsil duster. A feller can't afford to be without it in these alkali dust storms."

The Super produced a square bottle and knocked its neck off against the wall. "Here's how!" he demonstrated, tilting his head back. Holding the jagged glass close above his open mouth, Marsh guzzled a series of healthy swallows.

"Whuff!" panted Bull Jim, shoving the bottle across the work table. "Drink hearty!"

The bookkeeper regarded him, unsmiling.

"What's wrong?" demanded Marsh. "Passin' up free likker and smokes! A body'd take you for a Mormon."

"I am," replied the other drily. "And Mr. Kimbrough's name is Dan. Get out!"

"Who'll make me?" Marsh roared, snatching up the broken bottle. "I'll cut your gizzard out!"

The bookkeeper moved faster than a striking rattler. He yanked a single-action hogleg from an open-end drawer and threw down on Marsh's ample middle.

"I'm warnin' you to vamoose," the thin man told Bull Jim in a cold, tense voice. "My thumb's sweaty and slippin' off the hammer—"

The outer door banged behind Marsh's flying exit. The bookkeeper grinned after him.

"Wonder if he bluffs that easy at poker?" he speculated aloud, dropping the gun into its drawer. "He was too boogered to notice the hammer's broke off."

Marsh's corrosive temper became the scourge of the Mid-Mountain Division. Mal Scott caught its backlash when he brought the westbound mail-express into Caldwell. Leaning down from his cab, he saw the Superintendent on the platform.

"Salt Lake's rails is laid nigh up to our Solitude Sidin'," the engine driver told Bull Jim.

"That's a goddam lie, white men can't work in the Basin sun!" Marsh yelled back.

Scott kept his temper. "They're working nights," he replied, giving the Super a look that put acid in his mild words. "Kimbrough's rigged headlights and torches all around 'til it looks like a carnival lot."

The next morning Marsh ordered a caboose coupled to a light engine and rolled down to the Basin. Scott was more than right. The S. L. & S. D. head of steel stopped only inches distant from the Pacific Eastern right of way, coming in from the northwest. Copying the older road, Kimbrough had built a long siding. The passing-tracks lay in the angle between the converging main lines.

Nothing moved on the Salt Lake tracks. The row of bunk cars was silent. Tools and wheelbarrows were stacked; only a lazy wisp of smoke floated from the stack of a dinky. As Bull Jim, curious and scornful of such unorthodox road building, stepped off his caboose for

a closer look, he saw a lone figure under a tent fly rigged alongside the cook car.

The man saw him and came forward. It was Kimbrough, stripped to the waist, face lathered, razor in hand. The Super snorted; nobody but a green-horn shaved himself, especially out of town.

"Morning, Marsh," Kimbrough said evenly. "You saved me a trip to Caldwell. As you see, we're ready for that crossing agreement."

"Save your breath, too," growled the Super. "You get nothin'!"

"Be reasonable," Kimbrough argued. "You can't stop a crossing where there's no grade problem. That's the law."

"You heard me," Bull Jim retorted. "Go to law if you wanta. You might win—in a year or two. Where'll your franchise be then?"

He saw the muscles suddenly tighten in Kimbrough's lean waist and bulging biceps, looked at the gleaming razor, and retired hurriedly.

As his train backed toward Caldwell, Marsh watched Kimbrough curiously. Heedless of the blazing sun, the engineer stepped between the Pacific Eastern rails, stooped, and seemed to be measuring them.

"Loco as a tumbleweed," Bull Jim grunted, passing judgment on Kimbrough.

Entering the caboose, Marsh took a quart of redeye from a locker. The light engine was whistling for the Caldwell yards when he returned unsteadily to the platform. Clinging to a stanchion, the Super heaved the empty bottle at a prairie dog.

"Loco ash turn'lwed," he muttered, hitting the cinders as the train stopped at the depot. Straddling high wide,

and handsome, Marsh weaved up the dusty street to his boarding-house, fell into bed, and slept the clock around.

The Super's mouth tasted like a felt boot, but triumph sang in his brain, as he rolled into his office in the late afternoon.

"I got Kimbrough hog-tied and buf-faloed," Marsh boasted to Manlon. "That tenderfoot can't go nowheres. He might as well pay off his construction gang."

"He went to Wells on Number Three this mornin'," Manlon told his boss with secret satisfaction. "Bought a hundred tickets and took his whole gang and their hand tools."

The Super popped his safety valve. "That — can't ride on the Pacific Eastern!" he yelled. "Send me the fathead that sold the tickets. I'll fire him!"

"We're a common carrier," the clerk reminded Marsh. "Kimbrough plunked down cash. Ferris had to sell him."

Bull Jim smashed a hamlike fist on his desk. "Not by a damn sight!" he shouted. "The rules say persons likely to make trouble shall not be carried on trains. That fits Kimbrough to a ring-tailed T! Ferris must be in cahoots with the —! Why didn't you call me?"

"Let sleeping dogs lie."

"What's that?" barked Marsh.

The chief clerk took a deep breath. "The rules say not to disturb absent superiors unless in emergency," he said defiantly. "Sellin' a hundred tickets ain't no emergency. It's a plumb bonanza! Caldwell depot ain't sold so many in a day since the line opened."

"I'll learn you to read the rules right when I got time," Bull Jim threatened. "What's Kimbrough fixin' to do in Wells with a hundred gandy dancers?"

"Build his line, I reckon," Manlon replied. "Mal Scott told me the S. L. &

S. D.'s comin' up from the south lickety-split and will be in Wells directly. That'll give Kimbrough dinkies and cars for his work trains."

"All right, all right!" The Super waved impatient arms. "So he builds right down to Solitude Sidin'. How's he gonna cross our steel without my say-so? Fly?"

"I ain't paid to know that," replied the clerk, turning to his paper work.

Marsh got his answer on a blazing afternoon, when he lounged half asleep in his office. Steps marched briskly up the stairs and before Bull Jim could swing his satchel-size feet to the floor, Kimbrough was through the door. The engineer tossed a folded newspaper on the Super's desk.

"Thought you might like to see last night's Wells *Mountaineer*," the visitor said in an expressionless tone.

Marsh disdained the gift. "You got your dates mixed, young feller," he replied contemptuously. "The paper ain't in yet; our train's late."

"Right," agreed Kimbrough, "but ours isn't."

"Your train!" The Super tore the paper open. The editor's largest wood-block type bannered the front page:

FIRST TRAIN WELLS TO SALT LAKE LEAVES TONIGHT

"How'd—how'd you cross our steel?" he spluttered.

Kimbrough let him have it cold. "We cut your rails and swung a piece of P.E. track around to fill the gap in our line. We certainly appreciate your co-operation," he added dryly.

"You cut our line?" Marsh said in a strangled voice. "I s'pose you figure Pacific/Eastern'll shut down whilst *we* law you? Mighty slick scheme to get us into court where you can air the whole crossin' fracas."

The Super grabbed his black hat and jammed it down on his head until his ears stuck out like jug handles. "I'm goin' to Solitude Sidin' and replace our rails, so's P. E. trains can pass," he howled. "Then I'm comin' back to climb your hump and beat your brains out! Your goddam haywire outfit never will get a crossin' agreement now!"

"You can spare yourself a trip," Kimbrough observed casually. "My gang's at Solitude, making a permanent cross-over we can both use. The boys are red-eyed and riled from the heat; I won't be responsible for what happens if you mess with 'em."

Bull Jim wasn't heavy above the eyes, his weight ran to fists. What he couldn't riddle out, he smashed. He lashed at Kimbrough with arms like a pair of battering rams.

The engineer gave ground to circle his assailant and found his back against the wall. The Super whooped with joy and aimed a powerhouse kick at his groin.

Kimbrough swerved, felt Marsh's boot graze his hip, and moved in, his fists beating a tattoo on the Super's solar plexus. Bull Jim lost his balance, grabbed at Dan and fell, dragging the other with him. Encircled and half crushed in Marsh's bearlike arms, Dan drove short jabs into the Super's floating ribs.

"Leave us a few licks, Mister," a new voice spoke.

Strong hands pulled the fighters apart and hoisted Kimbrough to his feet. The office was half filled with weather-beaten young men in the soot- and grease-stained dungarees of train crews. Politely but firmly they edged Dan to the door.

"We got important private bus'ness with Bull Jim, or we wouldn't horn in

on your fun," they assured the astounded engineer.

The Super had regained his chair and most of his breath. Parapeted behind his desk, he glared at the intruders.

"Why ain't you fellers workin'?"

"Cause with prices risin' so fast, we can't live on eighty dollars a month," Mal Scott replied for his fellows. "Bull Jim, we gotta have another dollar a day to make ends meet."

"You don't get it!" Marsh snapped. "Then we're strikin'," Scott replied.

"Like hell!" the Super scoffed. "You're fired! I'll run trains with old heads until 'Frisco sends up new crews. Clear your junk outa the Company boardin'-house by sundown and get outa town. You'll pay full cash fare or ride the rods."

The train men crowded closer to the desk. Marsh saw the quick temper working in their faces and sprang to his feet.

"Lay a hand on me an I'll blacklist you on every railroad in the United States and Canada," he cried.

"What d'you think, Dex?" Scott appealed to Manlon.

"Bull could do like he says," replied the clerk unhappily. "Better go quiet, Mal. There's other roads that mebbee pay better."

The Super stamped into his office next morning to find Manlon deep in waybills.

"Has them varmints flew the coop like I told 'em?" he demanded.

"They cleared outa the flop house, but they ain't left town."

"Why not?" barked Marsh. "Nobody in Caldwell dast give 'em a job, knowin' I canned 'em."

"Times has changed," Manlon replied. "The whole kit and caboodle got

new jobs, at better pay. Kimbrough hired the boys to run Salt Lake trains."

The Super stabbed a thick forefinger at his clerk. "You give 'em the idee," he cried, "tellin' 'em there was other lines payin' better! I oughta fire you, too!"

Manlon pulled off his shade and got to his feet. "Any time you say," he retorted. "I can't get no work done, nohow, with you *carajoin'* all the time."

"Set down, Dex," Marsh said hastily, an anxious note in his voice. "You can't walk out on me thataway! You know my eyes ain't good for paper work. 'Sides—" He rummaged in his pocket and came up with a crumpled letter—"Kimbrough won't have no jobs to give, won't have none hisself, no more'n a jaybird. Old Man's comin' up from 'Frisco to tell me how he's fixin' to outfox that damn tenderfoot!"

His voice rang with regained confidence. "When we take over the Salt Lake outfit, you know what'll happen to Mal Scott and them strikers." The Super's huge hands wrung an imaginary cloth—or neck.

President Eph Fillman of the Pacific Eastern gazed curiously about Marsh's sooty office.

"I expected to find the windows broken and the furniture smashed from your continual ruckuses," the Old Man told Marsh. "You live up to your name, Jim. You tried to bull the Salt Lake crowd, and lost every round. You wrote me you'd block the Basin crossing 'till hell froze over. They're running through trains already, with the crews you lost through bullheadedness—what's a dollar a day compared with the cost of bringing green men from Texas and breaking 'em in on mountain runs? Now with this strike, we'll prob-

ably lose the new mail contract. Frankly, we can't stand that kind of competition."

Fillman stopped and coughed portentously. The Super's nerves crisped; he saw bad news coming up, marked *Marsh, personal*.

"When you seemed to be getting nowhere," the Old Man resumed, "we in 'Frisco had to make our own plans. It has been hard work and strictly on the q. t., but I believe we'll corral the Salt Lake & San Diego before they know what we're up to. We—"

The President's voice sank to a confidential rumble. Manlon put aside his scratchy pencil and leafed through a stack of forms, straining his ears.

"But if anything goes wrong, if there's more trouble on your Division, Marsh," Fillman concluded, "we may have to consider if you're the right man for this job."

"There'll be no trouble, Boss," the Super broke in. "How could there be, with your own crew handlin' your special? You'll roll over the Mid-Mountain Division like you was in your bed at home."

Driving hard for appeasement, Marsh played an ace. "When I heard you was comin', Eph," he said, "I fixed up a special dinner. Quail and the juiciest antelope steaks you ever sunk a tooth into. Nothing like 'em in 'Frisco."

Fillman patted his pot belly and consulted a gold hunting-case watch.

"Antelope's my favorite meat," he agreed. "I'll take you up on that, Jim! With a clear track all the way, we could leave Caldwell by midnight and reach the meeting in time."

Fillman rose. "You make me hungry. Tell you what: you're taking me to dinner, lunch with me in my private car. I've got some Kentucky Bourbon just off a ship around the Horn."

"Kaintucky, here I come!" boomed Marsh. His worries were forgotten: the old goose grease salved 'em all!

Manlon gave the pair time to sample the Bourbon before he stole from the office and hurried through back alleys to the Salt Lake depot. At the door his nerve failed and he stood uncertainly on the threshold. Sticking his nose in big boys' business was the surest way to get in wrong all around. Kimbrough saw the hesitant visitor and hailed him.

"Come in, Manlon!" he called. "You're safe. We only gun for P. E. bigwigs."

"Your huntin' season's 'bout over," said Manlon. "Eph Fillman is on his way to your annual stockholders' meeting in Denver."

Kimbrough lost his smile. "To our meeting? Whatever for?"

"To kick your crowd out and take over the S. L. & S. D." Manlon explained. "He's been gatherin' stock options and proxies until he got a majority. He aims to make hisself President and merge the roads."

The color leached out of Kimbrough's face. "Where is Fillman?" he grated.

Manlon took alarm. Acutely he wished himself back in Marsh's office. "You ain't gunnin' fer him, like you said?" he asked.

"No," said Salt Lake's man. At the clerk's dubious expression, he repeated his denial. "On my word of honor, I won't touch Fillman. But I've got to know when he'll reach Denver so my people can make plans." Kimbrough paced nervously about the small office.

The clerk stood mute. He was in for it now, had started something he couldn't head off. It was impossible to stay in the middle, he'd have to choose sides and

take his chances. Abruptly Manlon made his decision.

"The Old Man's special's lyin' in our yards," he said doggedly. "After dinner with Bull Jim he pulls out for Denver."

"I saw the flossy cars," acknowledged Kimbrough. He halted beneath a wall map. The rival lines formed a figure-eight between Caldwell and Wells, crossing near Solitude Siding.

"That might do it," the engineer muttered, thinking aloud, "but it would be fast work."

Manlon followed Kimbrough's glance. "I bet you're fixin' to stop a train on the crossin' and block Fillman's special."

The engineer gave him a taut grin. "You're warm, but not hot," he replied. He studied his visitor until the latter shifted restively under the scrutiny.

"Why are you blabbing on your outfit?" Kimbrough demanded.

Manlon flushed. "I ain't sech a skunk as you make out! They handed Mal Scott a dirty deal and the kid's my old lady's brother."

Kimbrough nodded. "So you're getting hunk. Scott has today off. Do you know where he is?"

"Puttin' in a garden for my missus," replied Manlon promptly.

"Tell him to come a-running to the roundhouse," Kimbrough ordered, bolting through the door. As Manlon crossed the yards he saw the engineer's long legs burning the cinder path to the bunk cars.

The special pulling out of Caldwell on the Salt Lake rails was no brass-and-plush flyer. Number 36, an o-6-o yard engine, tugged fretfully at a rumbling, rocking train of bunk cars, flats hurriedly loaded with steel and ties, a

crane car, and caboose. The smoke of forced draft billowed from her balloon stack; her whistle omitted the customary parting blast as she cleared the yards. Kimbrough's business was urgent and private.

Salt Lake's man rode in the cab with Mal Scott and Ed Boyle, his fireman, bracing his feet as No. 36 rocked around the curves. They raced through canyons where afternoon shadows counterfeited coolness. Foothills fell behind, smooth and tawny as mountain lions, ruffled green-gray-brown with mesquite and sagebrush.

Kimbrough checked his watch. "Mal," he shouted over the slam of the firebox door and the regular clacking of rail joints, "you know the Pacific Eastern's schedule. What's due next at Solitude Siding?"

The engine driver pulled his head inside the cab and leaned toward Kimbrough.

"Nothin' reg'lar 'til Number Seven, the mornin' freight," he shouted.

"Good enough," replied Kimbrough, thinking of Fillman's special streaking across the Basin before dawn, "but we still need every minute."

The foothills curved away on either side. Ahead lay the alkali flats of Solitude Basin, glaring yellowish white under the late sun, flat as a pancake, bare as a billiard ball. The rails ran ruler-straight to the horizon, to Solitude crossing. Scott opened his throttle to its final notch. Little 36 had never run so fast; her driving rods blurred with speed. The vibration stung Kimbrough's feet through his thick boot soles, set his teeth chattering in clamped jaws.

Not even steel could stand that strain. The right-hand side-rod snapped like a clay pipestem. The broken bar whirled

about the rear driving wheel, a demoniac flail, gouging the ties, smashing the cab, shearing off the engineer's window seat. Bruised and bleeding, Scott was hurled against the firebox. No. 36 shuddered and changed pace. She hopped like a lame kangaroo, like a kid with one foot on a stilt. In a moment she would jump the track.

Before Kimbrough and Boyle could move, Scott was up, lunging for the throttle. He was fast, but not fast enough. The whirling rod caught him twice, a raking blow along his scalp, a thud on the upper arm. Mal reeled backward and fell into Kimbrough's grasp, blood from his gashed head pouring on his broken arm—but not until he had closed the throttle.

No. 36 bounded less wildly and slowed down. Wheels along the train screamed as Boyle's frantic whistling brought men in every car rushing to the hand brakes.

As the train slid to a stop, Kimbrough dropped over the side and held up his arms to receive the injured man as Boyle eased him out of the cab. Turning away with his burden, Dan suddenly bethought himself of his errand in the Basin. With a sinking heart he called to Boyle.

"Can you fix her to run again?" Kimbrough asked, without hope. By the time help came from Caldwell, Fillman would be taking over the S. L. & S. D.

It was the half-conscious Scott who answered. "If Ed can pull the crank pins," the engine driver said in a ghost of a voice, "we'll make out all right."

Ashamed before a faith greater than his, Kimbrough carried the slight Scott at a stumbling run to the nearest bunk car. Willing hands, strong as they were suddenly gentle, took Mal from him and laid the patient on a bunk

quilted with blankets. Dan tore his own shirt to strips fashioning bandages. Signal flags became splints as Kimbrough gingerly set Mal's arm.

Then Kimbrough raced back to the head end of the work train. Boyle and a group of gandy dancers were disconnecting the broken ends of the side-rod.

It was twilight before Boyle climbed into the cab with a volunteer fireman and clearing away the wreckage of the driver's seat, eased the throttle open. No. 36 snorted, limped forward, dragging the cars. Her pace was little better than a walk, but the pent-up breath of anxiety went out of Dan in a long whistling sigh.

At Kimbrough's orders, Boyle stopped on the main line beside the Salt Lake passing-track. Just ahead the converging railroads crossed, between them lay Solitude Siding.

Primed for their work, the veteran gandy dancers poured from the bunk cars. Extra headlights and oil-soaked torches were set up, a "U" of smoky brilliance in the fast-gathering darkness.

Dan walked over to Solitude Siding, a track wrench in hand. There was a brassy taste on his tongue; in the sudden chill of the desert night, his forehead was beaded with sweat. What he was going to do was good only if it succeeded. If Fillman caught him at it—Kimbrough shrugged off the consequences and set his wrench on a fish-plate, loosening the first nut.

"Go to it, boys!" he ordered.

Wrenches wrestled salt-corroded bolts, claw bars strained and buckled evicting stubborn spikes. The sidings were dismantled and relaid to meet in a smooth curve. Rail-benders shaped cold steel, rail tongs and track gages

played their parts, sledges drove fresh spikes into tough cedar ties. All against time, while Kimbrough paced the work watch in hand, leaving only for a flying visit to Scott. His well-trained crew was hanging up a construction record, but minutes were hours to their nervous chief.

The last spike was finally hammered home. The gandy dancers extinguished their lights and retired to the bunk cars. Kimbrough climbed into No. 36's cab.

"Any chance you kept your Pacific Eastern switch key?" he asked.

"B'leeve I did," returned Boyle. He took a thick brass key from a ring hanging on his belt and handed it over.

Hurrying to the far end of Solitude Siding, Kimbrough unlocked the switch and threw the lever over, turning eastbound traffic off the mainline. Back on No. 36, he motioned Boyle ahead.

"Stop a quarter mile past the crossover, where there's no chance of a P. E. headlight picking us up, and make sure that every light on the train is out."

"Right," replied Boyle. "And then what?" Curiosity was plain in his voice.

"We'll wait to see how good my hunch is," Kimbrough said soberly.

Sitting on the tail steps of the caboose, wrapped in a blanket, Dan stared westward. The Basin lay in the dark of the moon, an inky lake impervious to starlight. There was no sound save the subdued sighing of No. 36 and an occasional muffled laugh from the bunk cars.

A pinpoint of light winked in the western foothills, grew rapidly, slashing a cometlike trail across the Basin. A faint humming swelled to a rhythmic roar; behind the probing headlight Kim-

brought traced the length of Fillman's special by its dim-lit vestibules and tail lantern. He tensed, in sudden panic wondering if the heavy train would hold the curve.

In the cab of the specially built American-type with 68-inch drivers, Lee Thomas took his glance from the track ahead and turned to his coal passer.

"Only the Old Man promised us a bonus, I'd never try to make speed fast time on a strange track—an' at night. We're out o' the foothills now; this must be the Basin the Mountain Division Super was blattin' about. Oughta be right smart of a straightaway. Reckon we can relax a mite. Gimme a chaw."

The American's bogie truck rattled over switch points, the engine swerved violently on shrieking flanges as it took the curve. The cars heeled over until another inch would have laid them on their sides, only sheer momentum and the drawbar pull holding them in line. The fireman caromed into Thomas and both fell.

"Crimanentlies, Lee," yelled the coal passer, "some — left the switch open! We've took a siding. Shut off! Shut off!"

Thomas untangled himself and scrambled back on his seat, grabbing for the throttle. He stared through his window, but held his hand.

"Damnedest thing I ever see," he exclaimed. "Thet damn peckerwood Marsh put nigh a right-angle curve smack in the middle of the only flat on the whole damn line! The one place he could build straight, he's too jackass to do it."

The locomotive banged over a second switch.

"Damn it, Lee," howled the fireman, "shut off, I tell you! We're in some yards, fixin' to break our necks on a bumper."

"Simmer down," Thomas ordered. "We're still on the main line, can'tcha see the telegraph poles? I figure them switches was a turning Y."

"Well, if you're so all-fired sartain—" grumbled the coal passer.

"Hell yes, I'm certain!" barked Thomas. "Keep your steam up and we'll be in Wells in jig time."

Scarcely trusting his straining eyes, Kimbrough watched the special's tail lights dim and wink out in the northwestern foothills. He lit a lantern and swung it in signal to Boyle, Little, limping No. 36 backed her frowsy cars over Solitude Crossing and past the switch, trapping the Pacific Eastern's plush pride on hostile rails. Rough mountain country looked alike at night; the special's green engineer would not recognize his predicament until he stared incredulously at the wrong depot in the wrong town.

With a great lift of spirit, Dan grinned at the thought of Fillman, fat and frothing, racing through Caldwell's streets to beat on Marsh's door. The fastest equipment Bull Jim might scrape together would reach Denver too late.

No. 36 puffed into the gate of the foothills. Kimbrough turned for a last look. Though the harsh gray light of false dawn silhouetted the eastern mountains, the sterile bowl that had saved the Salt Lake & San Diego was filled with tenacious night. The scene was lifeless, desolate, repelling, but Dan's heart swelled with gratitude.

For the first time in history a man blessed Solitude Basin.



Justice by the Ounce

By DAN DUANE

THE AMERICAN ALCALDES of the early days of California often dispensed a strange type of justice; before their unmourned departure from the stage of Old West history they had earned the uncomplimentary appellation of "jack-asses of the peace." A factual account, written especially for ZANE GREY'S WESTERN MAGAZINE.

O. HENRY once defined a Mexican *rurale* as a justice of the supreme court on horseback and armed with a Winchester rifle. Barring the horse and the rifle, the same definition would fit an alcalde of the early California days. Before the American occupation the native alcalde merely performed the functions of a justice of the peace. Later, his American counterpart usurped powers far beyond those.

Many of these American alcaldes were chiefly concerned with the matter of court costs and fines, both of which went into their pockets. Since gold

coins were still to come, they fined in ounces of gold dust, valued at \$16 to the ounce.

Much of the vigilante justice which was handed out in those early times was provoked by the ignorance, muddle-headed reasoning, and greed of the alcaldes. Often these amateur judges were duped or misled by tricky lawyers. One town in the high Sierra Nevada became exasperated at a lawyer who was unusually successful in winning freedom for his gunmen clients. The last trial in which he appeared as counsel ended with the jury bringing in

a verdict ordering that he be hanged. He was duly thrown into jail, but broke out, ran away, and was never heard of again.

One California justice of the peace appeared in court on the morning of his first day in office with the only book he possessed, Cushing's *Manual of Parliamentary Procedure*. He rapped his desk briskly with the gavel.

"This meeting will come to order," he announced. "The secretary will read the minutes of the last meeting."

There was a brief pause. There being no secretary and no minutes, the justice proceeded.

"Next in order is unfinished business." Another pause; then: "New business."

By now the attorney for the defense had caught the drift of the thing. He arose.

"Your Honor," he said, "I move you that this meeting do now adjourn." He leaned over and whispered in his client's ear.

"Your Honor," said the client, "I second that motion."

"It has been moved and seconded," announced the justice, "that we do now adjourn. All in favor will say 'Aye'."

The prosecuting attorney leaped to his feet with a scream like that of a wounded tiger. "Your honor," he roared, "this is irregular—outrageously—"

"Your Honor," broke in the defense attorney, "a motion to adjourn is not debatable."

"Shut up!" the justice bellowed at the prosecuting attorney, who was still roaring. "All in favor of the motion to adjourn will say 'Aye'."

The defendant and his attorney voted aye. The prosecuting attorney was too disgusted to speak and, nobody

else caring to vote nay, that ended the case.

Once when Alcalde William Almond was trying a trivial case, a lawyer referred to his opponent as "an oscillating Tarquin."

"A what?" roared Almond.

"An oscillating Tarquin," repeated the puzzled lawyer, at a loss to account, for the alcalde's evident wrath at an innocent quotation from Shakespeare.

Almond removed his feet from a desk on which they had been reposing, relieved his jaws of an enormous cud of tobacco, leaned forward, and wagged a threatening finger at the lawyer.

"If this honorable court knows herself," he exclaimed, "and she think she do, that remark is an insult to this honorable court. You are fined two ounces."

"But your Honor," the unfortunate lawyer began, not relishing the idea of putting up \$32 for the privilege of indulging in a classical allusion.

"Silence, sir!" the indignant alcalde admonished him. "This honorable court won't tolerate cussin' and never goes back on her decisions."

The lawyer paid and henceforth refrained from quoting the classics.

By a curious coincidence, most of those raw alcaldes held forth in Tuolumne County, which included Sonora, the county seat, and Columbia, one of the richest mining districts in California.

R. S. Ham, the first Tuolumne alcalde, assumed the office without even the formality of an election. He strove to hold it by catering to popular prejudices and passions. Any unpopular person who came before his court was in for a bad time.

But this trait cost him his office. He ordered the arrest of an unpopular man, accused of theft, and was preparing to have him hanged. But the unpopular man had one good friend, Charles Bassett. Bassett was a strategist. He issued a call for the election of an alcalde and put up popular Jim Fraser as a nominee. Fraser was elected. This disposed of Ham and also of the case against Bassett's friend.

Fraser did not last long. Gambler Atkins, roughly handled by a group of miners, turned loose with a shotgun and killed one, Boydan. As Boydan was not among the assailants, but had on the contrary tried to save Atkins, there arose clamor for a lynching. But order prevailed, and Atkins was tried before Alcalde Fraser.

The jury found him guilty of murder, and Fraser sentenced him to pay a fine of \$500 and leave the county. Boydan's friends were much annoyed and one of them announced that he was going to kill the Alcalde and would be glad to forfeit \$500 for that luxury. Fraser, a prudent man, resigned the office.

Alcalde Sullivan of Columbia always acted on the principle that the laborer is worthy of his hire. A Mexican charged with stealing a pair of leggings was fined three ounces, while the prosecuting witness was fined one ounce for troubling the court with such a trivial complaint.

On another occasion, when the rightful owner sued for a mule, the defendant was ordered to restore it and to pay one ounce fine and three ounces costs. Since the defendant did not have the gold dust, the plaintiff was ordered to pay both costs and fine, on the ground that the court could not be expected to sit without pay.

The alcaldes, for the purpose of getting the ultimate pinch of dust, sometimes misled the defendant as to their intentions. A young fugitive, who had stolen a purse of the dust, was overtaken and returned to face the alcalde. After listening to the evidence, the alcalde quietly addressed the prisoner:

"The court thinks it right that you should restore the dust to its owner."

The culprit, grinning broadly, complied.

"The court thinks you ought to pay the costs of court—two ounces, please."

Still smiling, but not so broadly, the culprit handed over the two ounces.

But his troubles were not over. "And now," continued the alcalde, with twinkling eye, "there is another part of the sentence, not yet mentioned; and that is, that you receive thirty-nine lashes on your back, well laid on."

Ezekial Dougherty, alcalde at Nevada City, was another character. A strong case, based on circumstantial evidence, was made against a defendant charged with horse-stealing. The defendant's counsel made a feeling plea against his client's being placed in jeopardy on such unsubstantial evidence, as he termed it. "I will now call witnesses to prove the good character of my client," he announced.

Uncle Zeke, as he was familiarly known, broke in: "What the hell is the use of calling witnesses to prove his good character," he testily asked, "when he's already been proved a damn' thief?"

In another case, after the evidence presented by the prosecution had convinced Uncle Zeke that the defendant was guilty, the attorney for the defense began with a line of talk that foretold a long speech. Then he remarked, "Your Honor, it is a presumption of law that

a man is innocent until he is proved guilty."

Uncle Zeke was tired and thirsty. He ceased his uneasy twisting and turning in his seat, jumped to his feet and announced, "Yes, but there is another presumption of law; and that is that a justice of the peace is not bottomed with cast iron. You may go on with your speech, but I am going after my bitters, and I'm going right now."

Attorney Leander Quint, of Sonora, whom Alcalde Richard Barry violently disliked, was minus the first three fingers of his right hand. While arguing he would gesticulate violently with this hand, extending the thumb and little finger in a manner that drove Barry almost frantic. After a trial in which Barry had, as usual, decided against Quint, the lawyer spoke up:

"Your Honor, I never did stand any chance in your court!"

"No, sir, and you never will," replied Barry. "When a man comes into court and wriggles his fingers and rolls up his eyes like you do, he can't have any show here. In Texas we have man traps, sir, that cost thieves their fingers. It looks damned suspicious, sir, it looks suspicious. But I hope it's all right."

These remarks, as reproduced here, sound like the words of a man somewhat more literate than Barry really was. He kept a record of cases tried by him that tell another story. Here are the texts of a few:

Case 101—Is a case where one Jas. Knowlton brings sute against Jose Sanchis for feloniously and surriptiously taking, steeling and robbing said Jas. Knowlton of San Francisco 1 buckskin purs or sack of goold dust of the value of \$4,000.

After heering the evidence projuced

in the caze I demand of Jose Sanchis whether he was going to plead guilty or not. Jose answered me thus, you find out. For which insalent and abhominable contempt of court I find him three ounces, and adjudged him gilty. I sentenced him to restore the goold dust to the court and to receive well lade on forty lashes on his bare back and to pay the costs of the court.

Costs of court five ounces which Jose not having I rooled that Jas. Knowlton should pay. Deducted the amount and returned the balance to the owner Jas. Knowlton.

*July 9, 1851, W. H. Brown, constable.
Richard C. Barry, J. P.*

In "caze No. 516" the costs of court seemed to be uppermost in the mind of Judge Barry:

This is a sute for mule steeling in which J. Ramirez is indited for steeling one mare mule from Sheriff George Work George swares the mule in question is hisn and I believe so too. On heering the caze I find J. Ramirez gilty of feloniously and against the law made and provided and the dignity of the people of Sonora, steeling the aforesaid mare mule, sentenced him to pay the costs of court and find him one hundred dolars more as a terrou to all evil doers. J. Ramirez not having any munny to pay with I rooled that George Work should pay the costs of court as well as the fine and that in default of payment the sade mare mule be sold by the constable John Luney, or other officers of the court to meet the expenses of the costs of court and also the payment of the fine aforesade.

*R. C. Barry, J. P.
Sonora, Aug. 1st, 1851.
John Luney, Constable.*

N. B.—Barber, the lawyer for George Work, insalently told me there were no law for me to rool so. I told him I didnt give — for his book law, that I was the law myself. He continued to jaw back. I told him to shet up but he woodnt; I find him fifty dolars and committed him to gaol for five days for bringing my roolings and dissisions into dis-reputableness and as a warning to unrooly persons not to contradict this court.

Barry was also coroner and kept a record of coroner's court proceedings. Here is a specimen:

No. 5—T. Newly killed by Fuller who shot him with a gunn, Jan. 30th, 1851. I find no property on the diseased. After trying Fuller and finding him gilty, he was committed by me and sentenced by the court to two years confinement. He broke gaol and run off.

The last "caze" of record, duly set down in fair, round hand by Justice Barry—his penmanship was much superior to his spelling—concerned "a sute between two gamboleers, E. Krohe, the gamboleer, who sude Sam Heed, the gamboleer, to recover 3,000 dolars lost at ceards." The attorneys were H. P. Barber—who seems to have insinuated himself into the good graces of Justice Barry since the \$50 fine and the five days in jail—and Lemuel Quint, he of the three missing fingers. It was on this occasion that Barry had the open collision with Quint previously referred to.

It may be noted that Barry referred to himself as a justice of the peace. It was during the years 1848 and 1849 that the petty tyrants of the lower bench usurped the title of alcalde, which was

supposed to include the powers of a mayor as well as of a justice of the peace. After that they dropped the Spanish designation.

One pioneer Californian justice of the peace who has left footprints on the sands of time was Judge Hollowbarn, who, discovering that there were justices of the peace in Sonora and Columbia, moved on to the next best mining camp, Jamestown, popularly known as "Jimtown."

Like other bold pretenders of the time, he sought no popular confirmation of his "claims." He arrived at Jimtown on the evening stagecoach and the next morning citizens of the camp were surprised to see a sign dangling from in front of his quarters:

HON. SIMEON HOLLOWBARN,
ESQUIRE

Justice of the Peace

Nobody felt inclined to dispute this bold usurpation. There was much civic rivalry in those days and the presence of a justice of the peace, they felt, put them a peg above camps that had none.

So Justice Hollowbarn found smooth sailing for a while. Then the lawyers began to come in, and his troubles began. The first lawyer had not bothered him at all. Attorney Putnam wasn't much of a lawyer, anyhow, and never questioned Hollowbarn's decisions, no matter how rank. They became close friends and often went on sprees together. But that did not prevent Hollowbarn from deciding against Putnam occasionally. The justice wanted to let him know that he had no collar on the court. "Old Put," as the lawyer was popularly known, never grumbled. He understood Hollowbarn and knew "what made him tick."

It was the abler lawyers who came

later, like Colonel James, Major Hoyt, and Sam Platt, who worried the hitherto top-lofty Hollowbarn by scoffing at his pretensions to legal knowledge, disputing his decisions, and even questioning his jurisdiction.

But still he was the autocrat of Jimtown, and as long as he was able to grab the fines and costs, he managed to put up with the sneers and jibes of the hostile newcomers.

Then came the news that a circuit court had been established at Sonora. Hollowbarn went on a big drunk to drown the shock it had given him. Now the lawyers could appeal from his decisions. Old Put was the first to appeal. Hollowbarn tried to laugh that off, but the laugh was on the other side of his face when the court sustained Old Put.

It certainly was a hard blow to his wholesale business of dispensing "justice." For he had established a chain of courts in a number of camps down the river, and when business was dull in Jimtown he would make a tour of the other camps. It was a simple matter. On entering a camp he would set up a canvas awning, set out a chair and table, and bellow in stentorian tones:

"O yis! O yis! O-o-o yi-i-is! This honorable circuit justice's court of Tuolumne County is now legally open for the transaction of business at Dead Man's Bar." Then, glancing around with a menacing scowl, he would add, "and any —— man that says it ain't can settle with me right now."

The "judge" was six feet tall, weighed about two-hundred pounds, and was mostly brawn and muscle. His arms were long, his fists resembled sledge hammers, and his general get-up was remindful of a rough and ready pugilist. So his announcement was rarely disputed.

Old Put's appeal rankled and Hollowbarn was determined to get back at him. The next time Putnam appeared in court, he thought he had an iron-clad, air-tight case. But Hollowbarn defied justice, reason, evidence, and precedent to give Put's client the worst of it.

Old Put was dancing with rage. He shook his fist under Hollowbarn's nose and bellowed, "So you durned old skeezicks, you've gone back on me, have you? Cuss your ornery hide! Haven't I winked at your iniquities, put up with your impudence, excused your ignorance, borne with your tantrums, and furnished you with the best whisky and grub in camp for months and months? And now, you infernal old renegade, you propose to throw off on me! I'll have you ousted as sure as my name is—"

Hollowbarn was turning purple; his breath came in gasps. But, getting control of himself, he broke in with a roar: "This yere honorable circuit justice's court is adjourned for five minutes while I lick hell out of Old Put."

Tearing off his coat, he leaped from the bench. Old Put started to run but paused long enough to hurl a chair and stool at his pursuer. His ankles entangled in the stool, Hollowbarn took a heavy fall. Panting with rage, he scrambled up to resume the chase. But friends caught and held him.

"Let up, Judge!" they begged. "Old Put is going for a gun."

Jogging across the country next day, the "judge" saw Old Put, likewise on horseback, approaching. A shotgun resting on Put's saddle bow forbade fistic chastisement. But Hollowbarn stopped to demand the reason for the insult of the day previous.

"Because you deserved it, you infernal old scoundrel."

"Well, Put, you are damnably fooled if you think you can run sech rigs on me. I jist fine you, here and now, two hundred and fifty dollars for contempt of court."

Put snorted. "Fine me out of court I'd like to see you try it."

The judge was furious. "I can't, eh? Waal, you jist see."

Next day Putnam appeared as attorney for Pike, a Missourian, whose valuable truck garden had been seized by squatters.

The judge, stroking his whiskers, regarded Put with a fishy eye. "I fined you two hundred and fifty dollars for contempt of court. Till that's paid you can't practice before me."

Putnam waved his arms, stamped his feet, raved and ranted, but Hollowbarn stood pat. Putnam drew his client to one side.

"Pike," he said, "I'm in bad with this old reprobate. Better get another attorney. Get Major Hoyt; he's a good lawyer."

Pike got Hoyt but while he presented a convincing argument, Hollowbarn turned a deaf ear. Just because Putnam had been Pike's attorney, Hollowbarn decided against him.

"I'll take an appeal," thundered Hoyt.

"Not if this honorable court knows herself," replied the "judge." "That's played out. No more appeals from this tribunal."

Hoyt persisted in arguing the question, but Hollowbarn cut him short.

"Shet up," he roared, "or I'll fine you for contempt."

Hoyt put on his hat, linked his arm in Pike's, and led him outside. "Pike," he said, "if you can give the requisite

security and get a writ of certiorari from the county court, you can have the case tried in Sonora in spite of the old scoundrel."

"I kin give the security; but the other thing—what do you call it, Maje?"

"Why, a certiorari."

"A which?"

"A certiorari."

Pike, set on getting it correctly, repeated the word three or four times. Then, having fortified himself with a quart or two of rotgut, he weaved his way back to the courtroom and up to the justice's table.

"Waal, Jedge," he drawled, "I talked this yere matter over with my li-yer, an' he 'vises me thet ef I kin give the security an' perjuce a sasherarer, I kin carry this case up to Sonora in spite of yuh."

Hollowbarn chewed his whiskers. "Yes, Pike, if you think it'll pay, and you ain't satisfied with my decision, I s'pose you can do it; but all I can say is, I've decided according to law and tried to do you justice, and you'll find that out when you've spent what money you've got in lawin' it and fecin' these infernal, thievin' lawyers."

"Never you mind what I'll spend ner what yuh've tried to do fer me, Jedge. What I want to know is, will the security on a sasherarer do it?"

"Of course, it'll do it; but as I was sayin'—"

"Thet'll do, Jedge. Y'infernal ole skunk. I gotcha this time whar the hair's short, yuh bet." And with one hand Pike threw a big bag of gold dust onto the table, while with the other he banged an army Colt's revolver down beside it, with the muzzle pointing directly at Hollowbarn's midriff.

"Thar's my security," roared Pike,

"an' durn yer ole gizzard, whar's my sasherarer?"

Justice Hollowbarn had plenty of "sand," as the saying went, but there is not answer to a loaded gun.

"No use quarrelin', Pike," he said, "you can take an appeal this time."

Pike snorted derisively. "Oh, I kin, kin I? Waal, fer fear of anything happenin' to make yuh disremember it, yuh kin jist pass them 'ar papers right over hyar this minnit, an' the thing'll be settled."

The clerk made out the papers with a shaking hand, and even Justice Hollowbarn's trembled a bit as he signed them.

This surrender established a ruinous precedent—ruinous, that is, for Justice Hollowbarn. He never recovered from the shock, and the rush of other summary proceedings that flowed in on him completed his demoralization. Bit by bit his failing morale crumbled away, and the

succession of sprees with which he tried to fortify his nerve only hastened the end.

One stormy night he stole aboard the stagecoach outbound from Jintown and kept a-going. He was never heard of again in old Tuolumne.

Tuolumne was not the only area to be infested by the gentry who ultimately came to be classified as "jackassess of the peace." They infested California as far north as the Oregon line. It was one of those northern counties—Siskiyou or Shasta, I believe—that produced the justice of the peace who won immortality by "reversing" the supreme court of the state.

Their absolute sway was truly brief. The establishment of county courts put an end to their intolerable exactions. They quit the scene even before the "road agents," horse thieves, sluice-box robbers, and other kindred spirits "folded their tents like the Arabs and as silently stole away."

LONE STAR LINGO

A Western Quiz

WHAT PASSES FOR SLANG in one part of the country may be just plain gibberish in another. That was just as true a hundred years ago as it is today. While certain words and phrases were current verbal coin throughout the West, each area developed some vocal variations of its own. This quiz is concerned with the slang of the Southwest, especially Texas. See if you can match the terms in the left-hand column with the correct definitions which appear, scrambled, in the right-hand column. If you can come up with six of these you're doing right well; a score of 7-8 is fine and dandy; and 9-10 means you're a savvy hombre! Answers on page 158.

- | | |
|------------------|--------------------------------|
| 1. Clean straw |Device for horse breaking |
| 2. Blue whistler |Chinese cook |
| 3. Sea plum |Traveling-bag |
| 4. Chassé |Strange gadget |
| 5. Kidney pad |Oyster |
| 6. Plunder |English saddle |
| 7. Dofunny |Go |
| 8. John |Personal belongings |
| 9. Go-Easter |Fresh bed sheets |
| 10. Ghost cord |Bullet |

THE STREET of the town is long and dusty, the bank easy prey, the getaway trail short and tragic. First publication of this grim little tale of an outlaw gang's gory debacle.

Slicker Than Water

By MARK LISH

IT WAS a long and dusty street and it was the town, and town was that single street lined raggedly with tall false fronts reflecting into it the thin heat of noon November sun. Between one of the eight saloons and one of the three General Stores and

directly across from The Palace Stable a bald word in cracked black paint stood high on boarding weathered gray:

BANK

No other designation and no pretentious listing of Capital and Assets; purpose and function stood explained, and the six men riding in threes from two directions sensed no lack. On each side and still a hundred feet apart they halted, and in each group two men dismounted and the third held three mounts from the saddle of one, and the four on foot met at the weathered pine door below the single black word and two went inside and two remained out with drawn weapons.

The pair inside were gone less than five minutes and returned without haste, each laden with a flour sack half-filled and jingling, the shorter backing out with high-held .45 still menacing those inside.

"Nice haul, boys," the tall man announced in quiet tones. He might have been any customer of that bank, commenting on the weather. "Heavy, though; one of you take the door till Jeff and I get on our horses, eh? Lock it, then; Jeff's got the key."

The blond man nearest replaced Jeff in the doorway, and the laden pair split



and walked, still unhurried, to their horses and took reins and mounted, and shook the sacks to hourglass shape and tied the slender middles to their saddle horns with ready thongs. The two still at the doorway came swiftly then and mounted, and three rode each way as they had come, out of the street and the town.

"Neat and no need for gaudiness, eh boys?" the tall leader exulted at the street's end and lifted his mount to a lope, and gave a little surprised grunt then and stiffened high in stirrups and toppled, to slide down his horse's shoulder into the dusty road. The blond man jumped his horse to catch flying reins, glanced once at his fallen leader and spoke urgently:

"Van's dead. Come on—that was a Buffalo Sharps—"

The younger man fell behind the led horse with lashing quirt and dust rolled in a cloud behind them, searched blindly and vainly by rifle bullets from a citizenry now roused and irate.

A mile out, the blond man changed to the better horse that had been his leader's and the youth, waiting, scanned with quickening interest a poster tacked to a tree. A pictured man not young, and below in thick print:

Don't let a good man get away. Re-elect Jim Fordyce Sheriff on November 7th.

"Day before yesterday," the young man reflected. Behind him the blond man grunted impatiently, remounted now and grumbling of too-long stirrups, the discarded mount grazing away still saddled. Absently, still looking at the placard across a shoulder, the young man reined beside his companion.

They made time then with expert horsemanship that gained maximum

distance with minimum expense in horseflesh, until after a dozen miles they came into rising country and at length halted in concealing timber on a crest that overlooked the flats behind and even the distant town itself. Good glasses from a dead man's saddle pockets showed the flats deserted of pursuits except for a single small dust cloud that came steadily, swiftly nearer. The blond man handed the glasses to his companion and said:

"Can't tell what he looks like under that hat. But he'll be that old sheriff I heard about when I sized up that town. Lawman all his life; moved here some years ago and been elected sheriff every term. Tracker from 'way back, great hand to do his chores alone. Sent the rest of the town after Jeff and Billy and Keeler, likely, took our trail single-handed. Well—"

With keen eyes he examined the slopes they had climbed, giving minute attention to trails and cross trails made by grazing stock and also climbing, then gestured toward a timbered promontory similar to the one they were on, but lower down.

"Bound to come past that," he stated. "We'll stash there among them rock below the timber and stop his clock. Can't have him trailin' us in—"

But the young man shook his head and his face was thoughtful and he said, "No, Blondie. Plain murder, that'd be. We just ride on and ditch him."

The blond man took anger then. "Ditch, hell!—y'otta hear the yarns them town men tell about that old devil's trackin'. He'd foller us right into the ronyvoo. And what'd Jeff and Keller and Billy think of us?"

"Can't help it," the younger man insisted "—and don't let that hand sneak too close to walnut, Blondie."

The blond man stared, cursed in amazement. But because he had seen this youth draw a gun and aim and shoot in about the time his own weapon might use clearing leather, he sent the questioned hand to a shirt pocket after tobacco.

"Hell, Kid," he grumbled. "Why so squeamish all of a sud? You with five killin's ag'in' you—three more than me, but we'd both hang. And I tell you that old devil a-comin' is hell on wheels and we won't ditch him. Ner we'll never git another chanst like this'n—"

But the Kid had turned to his horse and was mounting from the side opposite Blondie, eyes alert across the saddle, left hand only on the horn.

"We don't get goin', he'll be right among us," he said curtly, and gestured that the other ride ahead. This the blond man did, grumbling under his breath, inquiring once across a shoulder as to whether "that star-packer was the Kid's long-lost brother-in-law."

Two miles farther on the Kid reined in, just where a naked ridge branched from the main divide they were traveling, the ridge falling away to lower country while the divide climbed onward.

"You go that way," he said tonelessly, lifting his chin. "I'll keep on like this, draw him off you. If I don't hit the ronyvoo in three days time, the mule's yourn sack and all."

The blond man sent keen gaze along both routes, sneered.

"Draw him, hell. You're sendin'—tryin' to send me into soft country where a silk-hat dude could track a rabbit. While you head uphill into the rocks—"

"That's just it," the Kid explained patiently. "You say this gent behind's a tracker. Well, he'll figure, naturally, the soft trail is the drawaway. That the

best horse went that way—which it's doin'. Or the cash uphill. So, knowin' he's a *tracker*, he'll fall in behind the gent he thinks don't want to be trailed."

He reminded gently: "Think I'd risk my share of that cash you're packing?"

Blondie thought that over, nodded grudgingly. "Guess you're right, at that. 'Nother thing: sounds to me, Kid, there's some special reason you don't want this Sheriff Fördyce critter hurt. In which case, you better *see* he follers you. Anyhow—s'long, and luck."

"I'll toll him," the Kid assured, and watched the blond man go, making sure the other was out of shooting range before turning his back, thinking wryly, *Bad luck, he meant—so's to be one less to split that cash. Hell of a kind of men I've throwed in with. Though Van wasn't like that, and Jeff Nearly ain't.*

Miles up the divide he took shelter and waited, and through the glasses saw the lone figure top out, wide hat tipped forward against the chill breeze, and turn without hesitation in his own direction; short-cutting without even checking on the double trail that led to where he and Blondie had split.

Shrewd, shrewd, he was thinking as he put away the glasses and inched his head back out of sight as carefully as if the other man were a hundred yards close instead of three miles distant. *If I'm going to fool him, got to use everything he taught me—*

At midafternoon of the self-appointed third day, gaunt and tired on a played-out horse, he rode out of heavy woods into the pleasant grassy mountain park, a little surprised to find Blondie waiting there with the three other men.

"Thought maybe you'd take the mule someplace and water him with bonded whisky," he observed lightly and discourteously.

The blond man flushed. "I'm no good, Kid. 'Most any sheriff in three states'll tell you that. But I never yet throwed down on my pals. *Have you?*"

Three other pairs of eyes asked the same question, two with hard savagery as in Blondie's, Jeff Nealy's merely inquiring.

The Kid said meagerly, "Lost him day before yesterday. Been making sure, since."

Tension relaxed with Blondie's curt, grudgingly. "OK, then."

Jeff Nealy approached the Kid still in his saddle, said quietly up, "Among us, putting this and that we knew together, we've figured why you wouldn't whack the gent nor let Blondie. That old sheriff is your dad—right?"

The Kid nodded somberly. "Right. And he's a lawdog and a bullheaded old devil who'd throw me in jail if he got hold of me and knowed my record—which he don't, yet. But—"

"I know, Kid," Jeff told him gently. "Blood's thicker than water. My own dad got hung by a drunk posse when I was twelve, and they made me and my mother and kid sister watch it. Which mebby is why—"

He met the Kid's gaze with mutual understanding, left that sentence hanging. What was done was done, and if Jeff Nealy and the Kid were men wanted in more counties than the years of their lives, mourning spilled milk and bad starts would not cozen any sheriffs nor even themselves. Jeff added thoughtfully and, the Kid thought, reluctantly:

"'Course, Kid, you risked us all not doin' it Blondie's way. And the boys didn't like it and they voted you out. So this is good-by, but no personal hard feelin's. Shake."

"Well, I'm gittin' out of here," Blondie stated. "Ner we can't use this place no more. That old devil may be slowed up but he's still a-comin'—'less every man I talked to in that town a month ago is a liar."

He was on his horse and leaving, with a curt "S'long, boys. See you in the spring, where we agreed. G'-by, Kid."

"Reckon the rest of us better be drifting too," Jeff Nealy said. "Your split's in the sack yonder, Kid. Nice haul; outside of losing Van, the slickest bank job in years. And we counted it careful as if you'd been here."

"Sure." The Kid dismounted, picked up the sack in negligent fingers, its possession somehow less thrilling than had been others of its kind.

He was tying it on his saddle when the hammering clang of a shot and another made him jerk his head, to see at the timber's edge a horse down and threshing out its life, and Blondie lifting his mount on savage spurs to the shelter of a low stump of rock.

"—come out the timber smack in Blondie's face," Billy was crying. "Surprised as Blondie was—"

The man behind the down horse was obviously pinned there, but "forted" against the blond man's fire from the rock stump. The wide hat brim tilted masklike across his features as he fired across the horse at Blondie; the sun caught bright metal high on his vest front, to send gleaming rays into four pairs of watching eyes.

"He's pinned," said Keeler. "All we got to do is circle—"

"No." Instantly the Kid was target of hard stares. "No need killing him, pinned and can't foller us. I—"

"You." Keeler's bitter gaze and voice beat at the Kid. "*You*. 'Lost him day before yesterday'—to near kill Blondie here today. You got no say about this now, Kid. Six, eight mile yunder is a telegraph, and a strip of settled country hard to git through. And *I* got no crave to spend the winter hunted among these hills. *You* kin ride on, though, and we'll—"

"That's best, Kid." Jeff Nealy's voice had sympathy but it was businesslike too. After all, Jeff was leader now and the band's safety his responsibility. "The lawdog's alone *now*, but if we leave him alive he soon won't be. Ride on, and—"

"Sorry, Jeff." The Kid's voice carried a strange lilt of bitter humor, as a man sardonic at his own vagary. "Can't do it—damned if I could tell you *why*—"

Keeler's oath was savage and he didn't wait, and the Kid's hat left his head on the bullet Keeler threw. Then the Kid's gun was out too and bucking in his hand, and Keeler was down, still cursing, and the Kid staggered under Jeff Nealy's bullet and he said again, "Sorry, Jeff," and fired and Jeff Nealy was down by Keeler but still shooting, and the youthful Billy was on his horse and spurring desperately out of the hollow away from everybody; and Keeler stopped swearing on a gurgling strangled note and Jeff Nealy fought pain, the shocking blow of another bullet from the Kid, and pulled trigger and the Kid was down and suddenly the hollow was quiet.

Jeff Nealy took stock and knew he would not be leaving here, nor two

boon comrades of many a dangerous trail; and glanced across the hollow to see that Blondie too lay sprawled and quiet behind his stump of rock.

Forty seconds later a stocky, muscular figure came to its feet beside the dead horse at timber's edge and moved cautiously forward poised and ready; Jeff Nealy made a great effort and raised his Colt high and gave it a weak little toss, and the man came forward faster. Jeff's eyes were blearing a little but the other came close and surprise gave Jeff a final spurt of strength.

"Hell," said he. "*You* ain't nobody's dad—less'n it's a toddler. Where's that old-timer sheriff?"

The young man passed a hand uncertainly across his face. "Me, I'm sheriff now. Beat Fordyce out election day. Old'ns wanted Jim but the young'ns voted fer me. Jim swore me in himself and handed me his star and resigned afore—"

"—and a B-flat youngster hung to the Kid's trail three days acrost them rocky hills?" Amazement used up the little left of Nealy's strength.

"Naw. Hell, I lost them tracks first day out. But I hadda keep comin', and alone—or give Jim Fordyce and Dad their laugh. Kept comin' on blind luck, and on blind luck I'm livin' now. And when I git back, Jim Fordyce can shove this cussed star—"

Jeff Nealy looked again at the Kid lying dead near the young sheriff's feet, at the bodies of Keeler and Blondie as quiet, considered his own lifeblood soaking his shirt and the ground.

"*Slicker* than water, too," he formed words on the last of his breath. "We slipped on it—"

He laughed bubblingly at his grim joke and the grimmer one all around him—died laughing.

JOHN CHISUM, better known as "Ol' Jinglebob Hisse'f," pulled many a sharp cattle deal, but at least once he had to swallow a dose of his own medicine! An original ZGWM fact feature.

By W. H. HUTCHINSON



Old Jinglebob and the Legal Rustle

TALL and angular in build, tough as rawhide, as plain in taste and dress as the men who rode and fought for him, John Chisum never slept on a bed, not even inside his comfortable headquarters ranch. "Old Jinglebob" just pulled a blanket or so onto the floor and slept there. He went unarmed in a time and place when this was as unusual as a reconstructed Confederate and he did it for good reason. To kill an unarmed man was murder and frowned upon by all segments of Pecos society in the days before the Lincoln County War.

For almost twenty years, New Mexico Territory was divided into two factions, for-Chisum or agin-Chisum; the neutral died young or emigrated to a less positive climate. The ranchers who

neighbored him, and his political opponents, called him many things, the most printable being *King of the Pecos*; but not one of them ever said that John Chisum got his start in cows with a long rope, a running iron, and a bull that had twin calves every year. If they knew that he had left many an unpaid personal note in Texas, they thought no more of it than did Chisum himself. A man had to kill his own snakes in that high and far-off time, and if Texans held Chisum's unpaid notes why in hell didn't they collect them like Texans—face-to-face, with a plowhandle Colt for character reference?

He was long in the tooth and long in the purse and as wary as the stock-killing *lobos* he hated. He was a cow-

man "from who laid the chunk" and his great, low, rambling ranch house was a feudal manor whose hospitality encompassed as many transient faces at every meal as cared to invite themselves to "light and eat." The gracious lady who reigned over his baronial seat was his niece, Miss Sally; John Chisum, Ol' Jinglebob Hisse's, was a bachelor by choice, with the wry sense of humor that fifty years on the frontier bred in those who lived that long.

The Chisum cattle ranged up and down the Pecos—River of Sin—for 150 miles of stream and as far out on either side as a long-legged steer could graze. It was an empire of open range bigger than many a two-senator state back east. The Long Rail brand marked the hides of 60,000 longhorns, *mas y menos*, but the man, his cattle, his riders, and his ranch took their name from the homeliest earmark ever cut in a cow.

The Jinglebob mark was enough to make the *ladinos* in the mesquite thickets wilder than their natural instincts dictated. One-half the ear stood straight up like a fox terrier's; the other half drooped down like a cocker spaniel's. When a blue norther howled down from Canada, with not even a bob-wire fence to break its force those days, the ear splits froze, then dropped off, and the net result was startling. It didn't matter to John Chisum. His earmark was as distinctive as his own personality.

He could count three grades of cattle simultaneously, with the cattle being put by him at a high trot, and his count was always right. After he had graded a herd to his own standards, what was left might be fit for *carne seco*, sun-jerked beef, but even that would be tough. He called the Jinglebob riders his "warriors," and they

were. Apache, Comanche, Mexican, and gringo preyed upon the Chisum herds, so Old Jinglebob paid and fed his warriors well and bought their cartridges himself. In all truth, John Chisum lived up to the ancient maxim of the Scottish clan whence came his name: *There are only three people in the world entitled to use the prefix "The"*—*The Pope, The King, and The Chisholm*.

Born in Madison County, Tennessee, John Chisum was raised in the Texas tradition of free grass and free beef. Even before the Civil War, Chisum had trailed cattle to market at Shreveport, and during the war he delivered beef to the Confederate Quartermaster until Grant's control of the Mississippi put a stop to such logistics.

After that drizzly April day at Appomattox Courthouse, in far Virginia, John Chisum was in the same boat as the battle-scarred veterans of Hood's Fifth Texas Brigade—those that came back. The free grass was still free, and the free beef was the same and more of it. The only fly in this ointment of plenty was converting grass and beef into spending money.

There was no market in Texas for all the cattle that grazed unmolested from the Gulf to Red River, from Cross Timbers to the Staked Plains. Many a scheme tried to convert cattle into cash and John Chisum's contribution to this endeavor was to lose his shirt in a primitive packing-plant venture.

When the venture failed Chisum's partners took the legal escape of bankruptcy, but Chisum was too busy preparing for a new start to take advantage of this minor detail. In his book, it wasn't necessary. The enterprise had failed, so why complain about it? The only thing to do for everyone concerned

was to take your licking and try something else. This economic philosophy suited Chisum's nature but it failed to satisfy the creditors.

They held liens in excess of \$80,000 against the partners and they instituted suit to recover. Since Chisum was the only one who had not covered his number by bankruptcy, the entire amount was entered in the court records as a judgment against John Chisum.

All well and good, as far as it went, which was only within the confines of the court building. Chisum had assets—longhorns with four legs—but these assets did not lend themselves to attachment by legal process. Furthermore, assuming that you could attach them, there remained the problem of converting the assets into cash. Chisum invited the court to help itself—they knew where he lived and where his cattle ranged—and went about the new venture at hand: heading west over the trail blazed by Charles Goodnight to New Mexico Territory.

The Union Army might have defeated the Army of Northern Virginia, but they had not licked the Texas cowman. Far from it! They had provided the means of economic salvation if the Tejanos had the guts to take advantage of it. During the War Between the States, Kit Carson had harried the Navajo out of their canyons and onto a reservation near Fort Sumner, New Mexico. *Mangas Coloradas*, Red Sleeves, the only Apache force for unity, had died violently by treachery, so there were Apaches on reservations, too. Now, all these captives had to be fed at government expense and the easiest way to feed them was with beef: just drive a bunch of cattle onto the reservation and the Indians did the rest.

Cattle that cost less than nothing in Texas brought a fancy price from Army Quartermasters and Indian Agents in New Mexico; a price that more than offset the risk furnished by the Comanches who stood athwart the Staked Plains, still intent on the old, free way of life. So Charles Goodnight and Oliver Loving blazed the trail that carries their names today; from the Cross Timbers in Texas down the old Butterfield Route to the Horsehead Crossing of the Pecos, thence up that salty and unsettled stream to Fort Sumner and a fancy profit.

The next year, 1867, Chisum threw his first herd over the trail Goodnight had blazed and he, too, found the profits adequate for the risks involved. He also saw the possibilities of the Pecos country as a permanent base of operations, wherefor John Chisum went back to Texas and made his play. He put together a herd of 10,000 Texas cattle, all sexes and colors, for which he paid in his personal notes in lieu of cash. To facilitate his operations, he acquired powers-of-attorney from Texas cowmen authorizing him to gather and sell their stock without benefit of bill of sale and to pay for them later. These powers-of-attorney were kept in a long zinc tube and, when the time came, John Chisum strapped this tube behind his saddle and headed west with 10,000 cattle and his riders—a migration out of the Old Testament.

His first headquarters were at Bosque Redondo, just below Fort Sumner, and his holdings increased along the river under the twin pressures of growing herds and cold-eyed riders—his "warriors." But John Chisum was not content to compete for the beef contracts in New Mexico alone.

His annual sales in New Mexico for

a ten-year period exceeded 10,000 head, while in one two-year period alone he sold and delivered over 20,000 head more all the way from Dodge City to Tucson. It wasn't as easy as it reads on paper. In 1872 Apaches ran off a *remuda* and left only four horses to get a Jinglebob herd of 4,000 steers to its point of sale. This jackpot would have daunted lesser men than the Chisum warriors. Working longhorns on foot was tantamount to carrying your life on your fingernails, but they did it! The point riders used the four horses and the rest of the boys worked on foot, taking what scanty cover they could find whenever a longhorn got on the prod at the sight of these strange animals who yelled at him from his own level.

Once again, when Comanches ran off an entire herd that Chisum was delivering to meet a contract date, Old Jinglebob took his riders into Texas and gathered another herd from the first cattle he found. When disaster threatened you met it head on, but this time John Chisum fell afoul of the law and actually languished in the Las Vegas *calabozo* until his case came to trial.

When the case came before the court, John Chisum produced that ubiquitous zinc tube and disgorged it of its powers-of-attorney until he found the ones he wanted. The case collapsed, and young Tom Catron, the Territorial Attorney, who had hoped to make a name for himself, nursed his discomfiture and bided his time. Old Jinglebob went back to Bosque Redondo with his zinc tube and dismissed legalities from his mind.

By 1875, the Jinglebob spread was of such extent that Chisum could contract to sell 30,000 head of beef cattle to a single buyer—and deliver the goods.

The buyer in this instance was the Kansas City commission firm of Hunter & Evans, who operated out of Dodge City in the buying season. The efficiency of doing business in large chunks must have appealed to Chisum, for the next year, when Hunter & Evans asked for 20,000 head, Chisum readily agreed and set a price satisfactory to him. Hunter & Evans accepted the price without a bobble, and Old Jinglebob should have shied away—no cow buyer bought anything without at least a token argument.

Even if he had smelled the trapper's scent, Chisum would have gone the same way that he did. His warriors were adequate insurance that no one was going to *ranikiboo* the Lord of Seven Rivers; by this time Chisum had moved his headquarters from Bosque Redondo downstream to South Spring Ranch, below Roswell of today. Old Jinglebob went about his business unperturbed while a Dodge City newspaper carried a brief item to the effect that Jesse Evans, of the commission firm of Hunter & Evans, had left Dodge City with a crew of fifty men to take delivery of a large herd of cattle purchased from John Chisum on the Pecos.

What the Dodge City press omitted to say, probably abhorring the commonplace, was that the Evans crew were, one and all, the fastest gun fighters he could recruit in Dodge. That they were competent cowboys was a secondary consideration to Mr. Evans. What the Dodge City press also omitted, although this was unusual, was that Bob Hunter—Colonel Robert F. Hunter, to be precise—had taken the westbound train from Dodge carrying a satchel. This unwonted piece of traveling-gear had accompanied Colonel Hunter on

his return from a recent buying trip to Texas.

While Jesse Evans and his crew were raising a dust down the trail that led to the Pecos, Bob Hunter rode the cars as far west as they went and came in due course to Las Vegas, where he had a lengthy confabulation with an attorney named Thomas B. Catron. Thereafter, a satchel-less Colonel Hunter rode horseback down the Pecos Valley and arrived at South Spring Ranch in time to help his partner cut the herd assembled for their inspection by John Chisum.

As soon as a trail herd, 3,500—4,000 head, was put up out of the cut, a contingent of Hunter & Evans riders pointed it east toward Dodge City while the dust and confusion of the work went on behind them. There was no question in Chisum's mind about payment as these herds were lined out from his domains. He had done business with Hunter & Evans before and their promise to pay was good.

Jesse Evans himself ramrodded the last herd to leave the Jinglebob, the herd that brought the total to the contract number of 20,000 head; worth \$300,000 at the market price. After the dust of this last herd had disappeared beyond the eastern rim of the Pecos valley, and the affairs of the ranch had been looked after in detail, John Chisum and Bob Hunter rode leisurely up the long, long miles to Las Vegas to make and receive payment. And while they rode, Jesse Evans crowded that last trail herd east in a manner unseemly for a cowman who wanted his stock to stay fat on the way.

When Hunter swung off his horse in front of Catron's office in Las Vegas, Old Jinglebob should have felt it com-

ing but, if he did, he gave no sign. There were men in Catron's office to witness the transaction, men not friendly to John Chisum, but this of itself never bothered him. He and Hunter compared their tallies of each grade of critter, computed the price, and when their totals agreed, Hunter looked at Catron and nodded, and Catron, perhaps, permitted himself the luxury of a faint grin.

From his office safe, Catron produced the travel-stained and battered satchel. He gave the satchel to Hunter, who in turn placed it on the table in front of Chisum with the words: "There's yore pay, Mr. Chisum, with the interest figured in."

What Old Jinglebob said when he opened the satchel and found it filled with the interest-bearing, unpaid notes he had left in Texas so many years before is not a matter of record. It must have been pungent and descriptive. And its forcefulness must have gained an added flavor from the knowledge that Hunter had obtained the notes in Texas for as little as ten cents on the dollar. However, beyond saying his say, there was nothing for Old Jinglebob to do but take his medicine.

He was unarmed, as was his custom, and by the time he could get down to South Spring Ranch and raise a war party even the last Hunter & Evans herd would be well across the line into Texas. So John Chisum closed the satchel with a click like a steel trap closing, tied it behind his saddle in company with the long zinc tube, and rode south. And it seems more than likely that a hidden grin twisted his lips beneath their protective mustaches as the jogging miles shook his anger down into a wry acceptance of Colonel Hunter's "legal rustle."



Thirteen Rattles and a Button

By B. M. BOWER

HAPPY AND WEARY, of the ever-popular Flying U, discover just how important the number of rattles on a dead snake's tail can be. One of the B. M. Bower's inimitable rangeland yarns, first published in West seventeen years ago.

INDIAN-FILE, the three horses walked soft-footedly down the narrow sandy trail. Into the hollows left in the loose soil by their hoofs, the gravelly sand made tiny landslides in its haste to blur all marks of their passing, for the wilderness is always jealous of intrusion. On either hand the canyon walls rose steeply to a jagged sky line where junipers grew, and stunted pines leaned to drop their cones and watch them roll to the bottom when the fall winds raged.

But today was a soft spring day of sun and no wind at all, and the Flying U horses were sweating after their three hours of rough trail. Even Glory, imp of evil though he was, now ambled along half asleep, lulled by the soothing murmur of the range song Weary

was humming under his breath, matching its rhythm to the motion of his horse.

Where the trail widened a bit Happy Jack kicked his gray in the ribs and rode up alongside where his complaining voice could be heard. "Gosh dern it, Weary, I wisht we'd a brung a tent. Er anyway, why can't we stop at that old sheep camp this side that Big Butch cabin?"

Weary finished the verse he was singing. "That'd be a bright idea, wouldn't it? Nothing the matter with the Big Butch camp, that I know of. And the Flying U happens to own it—for a line camp. If you've turned sheep lover all at once you better draw your time and go herding woolly-backs."

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"Aw," Happy started to protest, but changed his mind.

"Aw what? Something's eating on you, Happy. Your jaw's been laying on your chest ever since we left the ranch. What ails you, anyway?"

"Aw, my feet's about killin' me," Happy Jack evaded the question. "If I'd knowed the Old Man was goin' t' send me off down into the Badlands to haze stray cattle outa the bresh, I shore wouldn't a let Slim trade me outa the only comf'table boots I got. These new boots is swellin' my feet somep'n awful."

"Well, that's what happens when a man tries to put a number-twelve foot into a number-ten boot," Weary observed with frank indifference, and pulled his hat brim lower over his right eyebrow to shield his face from the westering sun.

"Aw, they ain't broke in yet. I wisht the Old Man had a picked awn somebuddy else for this pack trip. Climbin' around in the rocks an' bresh after strays is about the meanest job they is; and the way my feet feels is turrible. Gosh dern it, I always do git the mean jobs handed out to me, anyhow."

Weary finished another verse of his song. "Every job you have is a mean one, to hear you tell it," he reproved. "There's nothing the matter with this one—except that I'll have to listen to you bellyaching for a week or so."

"Aw, gwan!" growled Happy Jack. "You'd bellyache too, if you felt like I do."

"Mamma," sighed Weary. "What's all this load of woe you're packing, Happy? Let's hear it."

Happy Jack eyed him dubiously, turned a darker shade of red, and opened his mouth twice before he made a sound.

"Aw—it's that there camp."

"The sheep camp?"

"Aw, you know what I mean. That there outlaw camp we're headin' fer. You know it's got a bad name, an' somep'n always happens when anybuddy stays there. That feller Big Butch had hung right on a log stickin' out f'm the corner—"

"Him? He was cut down years ago. You don't want to let a little thing like a ghost bother you, Happy." Weary suppressed a grin. "Why, there weren't more than five or six men died in there with their boots on, even counting the spy Big Butch hung for an example. Seven, maybe, all told—according to the history of the place. And only one man actually died there since the Flying U took it over. Shucks."

"Aw, I dream about all them dead men las' night," gloomed Happy Jack. "And you know yourself, somep'n always happens down there. Last time I stayed there—"

The argument waxed and waned as the trail wound in and out through canyon and brushy flats. Blurred tracks pointing up a sandy draw started a new and bitter dispute, Happy Jack loudly declaring that they were a man's tracks, and Weary just as firmly convinced that they were only bear tracks.

Happy wanted to follow them and find the poor fellow who was afoot in that country and probably lost and starving. Weary hooted at the idea. He said he had not lost any bear that day. With a pack horse on their hands—not to mention his half-broken bronc, Glory—they didn't want to tangle with a bear. And he made Happy Jack ride on ahead where he could keep an eye on him.

But Happy was by no means silenced. "Aw, it's a man, I tell yuh!" he bel-lowed over his shoulder. "And fer a feller that's s'posed t' be kind-hearted, you're the meanest, selfishest son of a ——" the word stuck in his throat. His mouth hung open as he stared at his companion.

Weary had flipped his gun out of its holster and pointed it straight at him; or so it looked to Happy Jack. Two shots he fired in one stuttering roar that sent Happy Jack's heart playing leap frog over his palate.

What happened next was somewhat blurred as to details. Happy was under the impression that he had been shot off his horse, so abruptly did he land on his back in the sand. He lay still as a rabbit hiding in the brush. Had his ears been longer he would have tucked them flat against his head.

Weary rode up, holding Glory with a firm hand while he holstered his gun. "Well, what you layin' there for?" he demanded sharply. "Yuh paralyzed, or something?"

Happy Jack gulped, crawled to a rock, and sat upon it, still eyeing Weary warily. His slow brain refused to grapple with the astounding occurrence. He reached guardedly for his hat. By the time he had dusted it off and set it on his carroty head, he was mad.

"You done that apurpose!" he charged heavily. "You knowed damn well ole Pete's gun-shy. You jest wanted t' see me git bucked off!"

"Mamma! Didn't you see that snake?"

Happy Jack did not like snakes. He removed himself hurriedly from the rock before suspicion seized him. "Aw gwan! You can't pull no snake story awn me! You jest wanted——"

"I wish to the Lord I'd a let him bite you, if that's all the thanks I get." Weary's hand was shaking so that he poured more tobacco into Glory's mane than he did into the cigarette paper he was trying to fill, but he kept the bantering note in his voice. "Mean to say you didn't see that rattler coiled up on the bank within a foot of your leg?"

Happy Jack swallowed. "Aw, you're jest tryin' to crawl out."

Weary shook his head soberly. "No, on the square, Happy, there was a rattler long as my arm just ra'ring back his head, getting all set to sink his fangs clear up to his eyebrows into your leg. I bounced a bullet off his head just in time. You go see for yourself. You'll find him, I'll bank on that." He waved a hand back up the trail.

Happy Jack glanced that way but he made no move. "Aw, there ain't no snake. I betcha they's a catch to it," he growled.

Weary gave him an odd look. "You'll find him, all right."

"Aw—if you're lyin'—Well, all right. But I never heard no rattle, and a snake always rattles b'fore he bites. Git that damn bronc uh yourn outa the way, and go ketch ole Pete."

"Say," Weary called in the tone of one making a request, "you might see how my guitar's riding, while you're back there."

Happy sent a grudging glance over his shoulder. "Aw, I don't see what yuh wanted t' lug that thing along fer," he grumbled over his shoulder. "Aw—where'd yuh claim that there snake is at?" Happy was now stalking the back trail, eyes on the ground, muscles tensed and ready to jump.

"Right over there by that pointed rock. No, that one about even with your head. See it?"

Happy did. He stiffened, retreated a step, and then approached the spot with visible reluctance. "Aw—yuh told the truth, I reckon. Fer once in yer life."

He broke off a dead sage branch from the bush beside him and poked the snake, leaning away forward. "Tail's wigglin' yet," he observed glumly.

"Hold it up so I can see it, will yuh?" Weary called to him.

"Aw-w—" But Happy did it, balancing the snake across the stick. It was a big rattler; so big that Happy's eyes showed the whites halfway around while he stared.

"Mamma!" ejaculated Weary, riding closer. "Sure is the old granddaddy of 'em all, ain't it? Shot its head half off, just like I said I did."

"Aw-w—I betcha that there was just an accident," Happy belittled the marksmanship. He was still harboring within him the secret of his fear, and it rankled.

"Lucky accident for you, old boy. I never saw such an ungrateful cuss. Well, pinch off the rattles and come on. It'll be dark before we hit that haunted cabin of yours."

"I never said it was haunted. But I betcha if they is sech a thing as ghosts, they'll be camped right there, jest the same."

Happy threw the snake down on the ground, eyed its ugly sinuous length while he got out his big jack-knife and opened it. Other iron-nerved cowpunchers might pinch off rattles with thumb and finger, but not Happy Jack. He would not even set his foot on the squirming thing, but held it awkwardly down with his stick while he cut off the rattles. Even then he pushed them away from the snake with

his boot toe before he would pick them up.

"All right. Hand them over and come on now, Happy. We've got to be drifting."

"Aw, gwan! Course you'd go to work an' claim them. These here rattles is mine."

Weary snorted. "Ain't I the one that shot him?" It is the unwritten law of the range that all snake rattles belong to the killer. "I killed him. That makes him mine."

"Aw, gwan—he was after me—you said so yourself," Happy Jack resisted stubbornly.

"All right, all right," Weary yielded in disgust. "Keep the darned rattles and pile on." Then, when they were once more headed down the trail, his good humor returned and he grinned reminiscently. "Mamma! I wish we'd thought to measure him. Say, he looked tall as a telegraph pole when he rose up there on his hind legs ready to grab you in the pants. How many rattles did he have, Happy?"

Happy dipped into a vest pocket, pulled out the rattles, and counted them. He rolled his eyes toward Weary, counted again, beginning at the other end and touching each section with his finger, his lips forming the word. He swallowed, was going to speak and didn't.

Weary urged Glory a step nearer. "Well, how many?"

Happy swallowed again. "Aw-w— gosh dern it, I knowed somep'm like this would happen. I knowed it 'fore we left the ranch, even. They's thirteen rattles, Weary. Thirteen besides the button. And you had t' go to work an' kill it: the only snake in the hull Bad-lands I betcha, that's got thirteen rattles

onto 'im!" Happy Jack's voice was tragic.

"Well, darn you, I killed him to keep you from being hit, didn't I?"

"Aw, mebb'y he'd a missed," gloomed Happy. "I'd about as leave be bit as to have this happen. Thirteen's the worst luck they is. That sure puts the hoodoo on this trip. You see if it don't." He shook his head sadly.

Weary's lips pinched in at the corners as if even his well-known patience was nearing its limit.

"Well—anyhow, here's your horse." He tossed old Pete's bridle reins to Happy Jack, who caught them absent-mindedly. "Pile onto that old pelter of yours and come on."

Mechanically Happy Jack obeyed, his homely face heavy with foreboding. They rode on, Weary twisted in the saddle, watching over his shoulder to make sure that Mixer, the old pack horse, quit nosing for grass tufts amongst the stunted bushes and followed after.

"Them thirteen rattles matches right up with that there dream I had las' night," Happy Jack began again, breaking a spell of somber meditation on the subject. "Bad luck's camping right awn our trail, an' yuh can't never make me believe any diff'runt."

In more lawless times, a ruthless group of men called the Big Butch gang had made their headquarters in a log cabin tucked away in the fold of the hills. And while the sinister tales Happy Jack referred to were mostly legend and the least ancient history concerning Big Butch was at least fifteen years old—he having been duly hanged for his crimes—in the full dark of that cloudy evening, a steadier-nerved man than Happy Jack was

likely to approach the spot with a certain dread.

Even Weary felt the forbidding atmosphere surrounding the place when they rode up to the door of the old cabin. Somber, lonely with the peculiar emptiness of a house deserted for months at a time, even in sunlight it could not be considered inviting. At night it was eerie. It hugged the hillside, and its one door opened next the corner where a traitor had been hanged. Happy Jack was not the only man who hated the cabin. They all did, if the truth were known.

"Well, we're here," Weary announced. "Right side up with care and the dove of peace roosting on the ridgepole with her head tucked under her wing—" He grinned at Happy Jack. "Mamma, but I'm holler to my toes!"

"An' I betcha Slim an' Cal never left no wood cut, neither, when they was down here last fall," Happy Jack mournfully predicted.

Weary swung down from Glory and tested the door fastening. "Never even buckled this strap I put on here a year ago. Well, we'll get a light here, and then you rustle some chuck while I look after the horses." His voice sounded now inside the cabin. "Say, Happy, where you boys been keeping the lantern lately? D'you know?"

"Hangin' awn that nail behind the door where it's always been kept." Happy Jack was keeping well outside.

A match flared and snicked into a catclaw of flame, revealing Weary's wind-browned face under his big gray hat, his eyes going this way and that, seeking the lantern. The match died out. He lighted another one and walked across the room.

"Here's the lamp on the table." He touched the dying match flame to the

wick, set the chimney back on, and held the lamp high that he might inspect the room. "Now, where's that cussed lantern?" He grumbled. "Come in and help look for it, Happy, there's nothing in here to bite yuh!"

"Aw gwan. Hunt the gosh-dern lantern yerself."

The lantern was not in the cabin. And, little as he liked it, Weary was obliged to unpack Mixer by the light of the lamp set on a box inside the door, and afterward to take the horses down and turn them in the corral and feel around in the dark for the pitchfork and the nub of haystack, and feed them mostly by guess. He did not like it. He kept thinking of rattlesnakes coiled and ready to strike without troubling to sound a warning first. Nevertheless, he whistled over the hated task—shrilly, so that Happy Jack could hear him and feel a little less alone up there in the cabin.

Because he was the kindest cowboy in the Flying U outfit, he whistled all the way back to the cabin. He was whistling when he opened the door and went in. It touched him—secretly—to see the relieved look in Happy's eyes. Poor ignorant cuss, it must be hell to be as superstitious as Happy was, always expecting the worst to happen. Kid him out of it; that was the system, if there was to be any living with him in peace. Lonesome hole down here, all right, but it wouldn't do to side in with him on it.

Thinking along this line, he scaled his hat across the room to the nearest bunk, and headed for the wash basin hanging over the bench. "Mamma! That coffee sure smells good," he praised, dipping water. "Say! How'd you ever muster up enough courage to make a trip to the spring in the dark? Weren't

you scared that thirteen jinx of yours would grab you?"

Happy gave him a dour glance. "Aw, I never went. That there bucket uh water was left from las' time, when Cal and Slim was down here."

Weary jerked around toward him, face dripping. "Mamma! You mean to tell me you made coffee with it?"

"Shore I did," Happy Jack retorted. "What else would I make it of?" Genuine surprise was in his tone.

"You poor fish, how many rats d'you suppose have drunk outa this bucket while it was setting here?"

"Aw—what's, the difference?" Happy argued belligerently. "If you was as hungry as yuh claim to be, a little thing like that wouldn't bother yuh atall. Come an' git it—if yuh ain't too gosh-dern delicate. An' I tell yuh right now, I'd a went without coffee b'fore I'd a went up amongst them rocks in the dark. Bad luck'll come quick enough without goin' out to round it up!"

"Still counting them rattles one short, hunh?" Weary pulled a box to the table and reached for a tin basin of canned corn fried in bacon grease. "Go ahead and talk about your thirteen rattles and a button, if you got to talk. Or those bear tracks you wanted to follow up that draw—"

Happy slumped down on another box dejectedly. "Human tracks, yuh mean. I betcha we find that pore lost feller dead some place, 'fore we git outa here. It's an unlucky place, an' yuh can't make nothin' else of it."

"Say," Weary drawled impatiently, "I wish you'd quit walling your eyes 'round like that. What yuh looking for? A spook?"

"Aw-w—I was lookin' fer that gosh-dern lantern. Slim an' Cal never pack-

ed it back to the ranch; I was right there when they throwed off their stuff. There ain't enough water fer dishwater, the way you hogged it all t' wash yer face 'n' hands. And I ain't goin' to no spring in no dark. Not after dishwater."

Weary shrugged his tired shoulders. "Suits me. I'm ready to hit the hay. Which bunk do you want, Happy?" He went over to the pack and began sorting blankets, whistling under his breath as if he felt quite comfortably at home.

"Aw, I don't want none of 'em," Happy grumbled. "I know I ain't goin' t' git much sleep." His glance roved uneasily around the shadowy room. "I dream' I was here, an' I went out that door there, an' that feller they hung was a-hangin' there—"

"Oh, dry up!"

"—and I never seen 'im at first, an' then he—the rope broke an' he come down on top of me! An' if that ain't a warnin' somep'm's goin' t' happen, what is?"

With a sigh of complete surrender, Weary had picked up his sacked guitar and was removing its wrapping of extra shirts, a coat, and a cherished bath towel. He plucked the strings tentatively, twisted keys, ran the scale with his head tilted to listen, and strummed the opening bars of the *Battle of Waterloo*.

"An' you take an' put them thirteen rattles on top uh that there dream, an' I tell yuh right now, Weary, I'd about as soon lay my bed outside some'ers."

Weary laid the guitar down on an empty bunk. "Go on outside. I wish yuh would," he said exasperatedly. He pulled off a boot and dropped it with the finality of a tired man who means to sleep regardless of what happens.

"Aw, I would, all right, if I could find that gosh-dern lantern."

Happy Jack went sullenly to the disordered pack and began making his bed on an empty bunk.

That he chose his bunk nearest to Weary's spoke eloquently of his sincerity. But he did not get into it at once. He pottered around the room, unpacking the kyacks and putting bacon and flour away on the shelves, even stacking the canned stuff on a shelf in a neat pyramid so that the gay pictures of ripe tomatoes and ears of corn faced outward.

But the oil was getting low in the dingy lamp bowl and the wick began to sputter. Happy Jack gave it a startled look and hurried his preparations for bed.

But he could not sleep; rather, he lay there listening to the whispering sounds in the treetops as the night wind stirred their new-leaved branches. He heard a mouse nibbling something in the corner by the stove. He heard—

"Weary!" he whispered in a guarded undertone. "Weary! D'you hear that?"

Weary gave a sleepy sigh and turned over with a rustle of old hay in the bunk. "Hunh?"

"I heard somep'm!" Happy whispered agitatedly. "D'you hear it?"

"Hunh?"

"Somebuddy was—breathin'!"

"Damn—fool—" Weary muttered, and slipped over the edge into the deep pool of a tired man's slumber.

Habit and the raucous snoring of Happy Jack nagged Weary into full wakefulness next morning. He sat up, knuckled his eyes, blinked at the big gloomy room, and swung his legs out

over the side of the bunk with a resigned yawn and reached for his pants. Holding them sagging from one hand, with the other he picked up his hat and set it on his head; which also was habit born of countless nights and mornings under the open sky. Still sitting on the side of his bunk, he was rolling a cigarette when abruptly he extended a long leg and kicked Happy Jack in the ribs.

"Hey, wake up!"

Happy Jack gave a strangled snort and curled up like a threatened worm. "Aw, gwan!" he mumbled. "Can'tcha let a feller sleep?" And he clawed the covers blindly, his eyes screwed shut.

"No, doggone yuh! Come alive. I want to know where you found that darned lantern."

"Hunh? Aw, there ain't no lantern. Lemme be. I never got no sleep last night." Happy hitched his shoulders farther under the blankets.

"Well, pile out. Sun's away up." Twisting the end of his cigarette, Weary searched in his pockets for a match. "On the square, Happy, where'd yuh find it?"

Happy Jack flopped over, still clutched in the fog of a restless sleep. "Aw, I never found nothin', an' you know it. I never slept at all, I tell yuh. Not till most mornin'. You was dead t' the world—er pretended to be. But you was doin' some double snorin', for sure. Don't try to kid me out of it—tryin' t' git a rise outa me thataway."

Weary eyed him curiously. "What d'yuh mean, 'double snoring'? Mamma! I was tired enough to do a healthy job of snoring for one man, all right, but I sure never snored double."

Happy sat up and goggled at Weary with owlish gravity. "If it wasn't you, what was it?" he demanded. "I was

layin' here as wide awake as what I am right now, and I heard two men snorin' in this room." He swallowed dryly as his glance roved around the room much as Weary's had done. "I tried to wake yuh up, but you wouldn't do nothin' but grunt. And even when you stopped for a minute, the snorin' went right on like as if they was some-buddy over in one uh them other bunks."

Both looked toward the bare bunks at the other end of the room. Then they looked at each other. With a lift of his shoulders, Weary began pulling on his boots. "Unless someone got in here in the night—"

"Aw, gwan. They couldn't—not without makin' a noise. That there guitar of yours is standin' right where I leaned it up against the door, 'fore I went t' bed."

With an indignant stamp Weary's second boot went on and he made for the door. "I oughta lick the stuffing outa you, Happy. That sure was a bright trick, wasn't it? If that door had opened—"

"Aw, that there's the idea. I knowed you'd come up a shootin' if that guitar of yours got t' bangin' in the night. Anyways, that proves 't nobuddy never got in here las' night. An' there was two snores goin', you an' another one. All night, most." He broke off to stare incredulously. "There's that gosh-dern lantern!" he blurted out.

"Sure. Where'd yuh dig it up?"

Happy was morosely getting into his clothes. He gave a grunt of worry and disgust combined. "This here," he stated grimly, "ain't no time fer joshin'."

Weary stared round the four solid log walls, broken only by the three small windows which were nailed shut.

He went to each in turn and thumped it.

"These windows haven't been monkeyed with—My guitar settled the door question. Nobody got in that way. There's no attic—just the solid roof; and there's nobody down in this country anyway. Or there isn't likely to be. And you know as well as I do, Happy, that lantern wasn't on the table last night; not when I went to bed, anyway. Look at it."

They both looked at the table where the lantern with its smoky chimney stood boldly on the corner of the table, right where Weary's elbow had rested at supper last night. Weary picked it up, shook it until he heard the oil sloshing faintly in its tin bottom, set it down, and stared at Happy Jack.

"I betcha it's that there jinx workin'." Happy's face was slowly paling under the freckles and tan. "There's a hoodoo on this here camp. It's them thirteen rattles."

At breakfast Happy Jack declared that two big hunks of bannock and several extra slices of fried bacon were missing. He had turned a pan over the plate to keep the rats off the food, but while the pan was in place, the food was gone.

Weary stubbornly refused to take the matter seriously. He still thought Happy Jack had found the lantern and put it on the table just to run a whizzer on him. He maintained that spooks do not snore, and neither do they consume hunks of bannock and cold fried bacon. The whole thing, was easily explained, according to his argument. Those thirteen rattles—and the button—had got Happy completely buffaloed. He was so sure of a jinx that if there weren't one he'd make it himself. Maybe he had walked in his sleep to the spot where

the lantern happened to be. He had a nightmare and dreamed about that double snoring; any fool would know that.

"And furthermore, you ate the bannock and bacon in your sleep—if there was any, which I doubt. Seems to me we cleaned up the whole works last night. I'd almost swear we did."

"Aw-w—you wait!" Happy Jack muttered darkly. "You just wait till them thirteen rattles gits their work in good." He pulled them from his pocket and stood eyeing them with fascinated loathing.

"Aw, stick the damn things in the stove and rustle us some lunch to pack with us. We got work to do besides chase spooks all day!" Weary turned and stalked out toward the corral.

They were still arguing sarcastically while they saddled for the day's work; they wrangled all the way up Fishback Canyon. They separated then to comb the countless little draws on either side of the canyon and they did not meet again—at least for conversational purposes—until they had closed the gate on the last wild cow and her calf and were on their way back to the corral.

Weary, though he had a hard day of riding behind him, with hectic interludes of climbing afoot through rocks and brush after some cantankerous critter, was in a remarkably good humor. He sang and he kidded Happy Jack about his jinx and his blistered heels and the color of his hair. He even volunteered to fill the woodbox with wood. He dug a treasured pair of beaded moccasins out of his warbag and lent them to Happy, and recommended soap for his heels.

So they got through that evening more or less harmoniously. And Happy

Jack recovered his spirits sufficiently to bake three pies after supper, using dried apricots for the filling and bacon grease to shorten the crust. He made them rich and he made them sweet, and the odor of them filled the cabin when they came from the oven. They each ate a piece hot as their tongues could endure, and went to bed. And Happy Jack slept like a dead man and his dreams were not so disturbing as one would expect them to be in the circumstances. As for Weary, nothing ever disturbed him very seriously anyway, especially when he was asleep.

So that night two men snored peacefully in Big Butch's old cabin, and no man lay awake worrying about it. Even Happy Jack found nothing to complain of next morning but his boots rubbing his blisters, and not once did he mention the jinx or the thirteen rattles—not counting the button—or the men who had died violently in that cabin. They contrived a way to carry apricot pie in their lunch bag and rode away quite contentedly together.

But that night, just when Weary's deep breathing was beginning to take on an audible rhythm, Happy Jack's big freckled hand got him by the shoulder.

"Weary!" he whispered urgently. "Wake up an' listen!"

Weary choked off his first gentle snore in the middle. "Hunh?"

"Listen! Somebody was groanin' somep'm awful."

"Wind," diagnosed Weary and twitched away from Happy's fingers. "Lay down and shut up."

Happy Jack subsided for perhaps two minutes. Then once more he dragged Weary back to consciousness. "Aw—listen now! Can't yuh hear that

groanin'?" His voice shook. "There—Hear that?"

Evidently Weary did, for he sat up. "Must be one of the horses. Colic, maybe." In the dark Happy felt him stir, feeling for his clothes.

Weary struck a match, held it high and went to the lamp, lighting it before the match flame died.

"Aw, I've heard about these here groans before," quavered Happy Jack. "That ain't no horse."

Weary did not answer. He hushed Happy Jack with a gesture, listening. Unmistakably there was groaning. It sounded human and it sounded close. Happy Jack was clawing his pants on.

"It's that gosh-dern jinx," he mumbled just under his breath. "I ain't goin' t' stay another night in this place—"

"Dry up. Listen. It's up on the roof. Can't yuh hear it?"

"Aw, shore I can hear it. But it ain't up awn the roof—it ain't nowhere. I'm goin' t' git outa here."

The lantern in his hand, Weary unfastened the door and went out. Happy was at his heels. Overhead the stars were brilliant, close above the tree-tops. Or looked so. The branches stood quiet, with scarcely a whisper of young leaves. The two men stood in a pool of yellow light, their shadows black on the ground beside them.

"Listen, Happy."

It came again, a terrible groaning sound of a man in agony. Weary cocked his head sidewise, trying to locate the source of that awful moaning.

"Sounds inside, don't yuh think?" And he started back toward the door.

"Aw, let's get outa here, Weary! That feller they hung—"

"A man don't groan when he's hung." Within the doorway Weary stood still as a crescendo wail rose, held quavering

upon a high note, and fell away to a piteous moaning that lifted the hair on the back of Weary's neck. He stepped outside rather quickly for a man who was not scared.

"By thunder, that noise comes from the roof," he said in a voice not quite natural. "Here. You hold the lantern up, Happy, while I take a look."

Weary scrambled up the hand-split shakes to the ridgepole and roosted there, vaguely outlined against the stars. And while he sat there waiting, the air was rent by a shriek, muffled, yet so close one could hear the sobbing breath beneath the clamor.

Weary came down in a hurry and swore at Happy Jack who was taking long steps for the corral with the lantern. "Come back here, you darned fool! I've got it located now. Come here with that light! It's inside." He waited while Happy Jack's reluctant footsteps drew closer. "Come on, Happy. I want to show you something."

He led the way inside, took the lantern from Happy Jack and lifted it to shine on the ceiling. "Don't you notice anything funny about that roof?"

Happy sent a brief glance upward, edging toward the door. "Naw, I don't notice nothin' funny about nothin'," he stated glumly and ducked as the groan sounded directly over his head.

"It's flatter inside than it is outside," Weary explained hurriedly. "Right here in this corner's where it comes from, I believe—Here. Hold the light. Inside, you chump. This bench, and the shelf—Mamma, but this is a cute stairs, once you get the hang of it."

He was talking chiefly for the steadying effect of his words on Happy Jack. Like singing to a herd on a thundery night. From a bench standing uselessly against the wall near the door he had

stepped to a shelf built of hand-sawed planking and braced to hold weight, a relic of Big Butch's stout carpentry. And from the shelf any able-bodied man could easily lift aside the loose planks of the roof and climb up, using a cunningly jutting log for a foothold. Even Happy Jack could not fail to grasp the situation then.

There were groaning and moaning and incoherent pleas for death. Followed a protesting squawk as Weary braced himself, got a fresh hold, and dragged at something.

"Hang that darned lantern on a nail where you won't knock it over, and catch a holt here when I ease him down. Here's your spook, Happy. Grab 'im."

"Aw, I never said it was a spook. I betcha it's that there pore lost feller I seen the tracks of," Happy argued.

"Whoever he is, he's sicker than a poisoned pup. Easy, old-timer. We'll get yuh outa here and fix you up in no time." This last was to the sick man whose outcries were terrible to hear while they eased him down as gently as possible and laid him on Happy Jack's bunk, it being the nearest.

"Uh—what yuh suppose ails him, Weary? He's sufferin' somep'm awful. I betcha he's dyin'."

Weary, eyeing the sufferer during a spasm, shook his head. "Sounds to me like he's been loading up on your cookin', Happy. Miss any, tonight?"

Happy Jack rolled his eyes toward the cupboard. "Aw, them two pies I was savin' is gone," he admitted. "I thought it was you ribbin' up a laugh awn me er somep'm so I never said nothin' about it. You s'pose he et 'em?"

Weary studied the patient. "Well, judging by the symptoms, we'll find

out damn quick." He made a dive for an old bucket by the wash bench. He was barely in time.

"The whole thing," declared Weary, "looks darned fishy to me. He can talk till he's black in the face, but he'll never make me swallow that yarn of his."

"Aw gwan," Happy Jack hotly contended. "That's jest 'cause you kep' sayin' it was bear tracks when they was this pore lost feller walkin' afoot when his horse fell over a cliff an' broke its neck. I knowed all the time—"

"Say, if you know so much, Happy, just explain what those tracks were headed off up that draw for. There's no way out the other end; it heads into a blind canyon up about a mile and a half. And there weren't any tracks coming out, you remember. Furthermore, that's a good big fifteen miles from here."

"Aw, s'pose it is? That's what played him out, walkin' so fur. He said so."

"Yeah," said Weary with much sarcasm. "I noticed he said just about everything you asked him to. Time he'd lapped up half a bottle of Jamaica ginger, he was ready to add all the trimmings to the words you put in his mouth. He had his story all framed, ready to spring it in case he was found." Weary added remorselessly, "How the devil would a stranger with a sprained ankle find that nest up there above that false roof that we never knew was there?"

"Aw—" Happy Jack blinked at that. "Well, jes' like he said. He heard somep'm up there an' jes' got t' lookin' around. He was huntin' grub an' he heard rats a-jinglin' tin cans er somep'm. He said it was at night and he never knowed there wasn't s'posed t' be no attic—"

"Yeah, I heard him." Weary snapped a yellowjacket from his bacon sandwich with thumb and finger, took a bite, and waggled a finger at Happy Jack.

"Figure it out for yourself, Happy. Big Butch never built that cabin with the idea of just any folks stumbling on it. And it's darned hard to find if you don't know where to look if you ask me. And him on his way to Miles City! If that's so, what's he doing north of the river?"

Happy Jack had a rare flash of intelligence. "Aw, he never said where he started from," he pointed out. "He mighta been comin' down from Canada or some place."

"He might," Weary laconically admitted. "Riding in a hurry, I bet. Might be one of that bunch that robbed the bank in Chinook a week or ten days ago, too. That's about it."

"Aw, gwan. That feller ain't no more a bank robber than you be."

"What'll yuh bet he ain't on the dodge? You remember there were four of those birds, and they only got two, last I heard. He's a hard customer. You can tell that much."

"Aw, he's sick!" Happy Jack defended. "Jest 'cause he hid up in the roof you think he's an outlaw. An' he told why he done that, didn't he? Us ridin' up in the dark like that, and him with no gun or nothin', an' a lame leg an' everything, he was jes' playin' safe. He said so. An' he was goin' t' make hisself known las' night, only he got sick."

"That's once when your cooking was all to the good, Happy. Mebbe saved our lives. About one more night to rest up and he'd have landed on us like a hawk on a cottontail. You can bet on that."

Weary swallowed the last of his lunch, wiped his fingers on his handkerchief and got out tobacco and papers. Happy Jack, sitting with his sore feet soaking in the spring creek where they were making noon camp, was mumbling to himself.

Weary lighted his cigarette and got to his feet with a sigh, tossing his match stub into the tiny streamlet. "Pull on your nice new boots, Happy. If we fly right at it we oughta comb the rest of these draws today and the worst will be over. All the rest of this darned country we can cover on horseback; what ain't ridable is so steep a mountain goat'd break his neck trying to climb it. So cheer up, old-timer."

"Aw, that's easy t' say when yuh ain't got to climb around with blisters big as yore fists awn both heels," gloomed Happy, reaching reluctantly for his boots. He groaned loudly as one boot went on, raking his sore heel. "Ow-w!"—the other boot went on.

Their unexpected guest became a problem which dominated the thoughts of each, though in a different way. Even while they sweated that afternoon gathering cattle they must have been thinking about the stranger, for when they rode up from the pasture at sundown their first words concerned him.

"Now listen, Happy," Weary began, reining his tricky sorrel close. "I've been thinking about that jasper. We've got to do something about him right away."

"If he ain't went an' died," Happy Jack interjected with his usual pessimism. "I'd orta stayed an' took care of him."

"What we've got to do is take him in to the ranch. He claims he don't know the country, and if he did we can't let

him go off on one of our horses alone. That would be a hell of a note. So we'll just let on we're through here and going back anyway, and put him on Mixer and take him in. If he's on the dodge, we'll get word to the sheriff—"

"Aw," Happy Jack defended, "I'd shore hate t' be as suspicious as what you be."

"Well, it's a darned suspicious circumstance, if you ask me. Mamma! See them two cottontails, Happy? You go ahead and get a fire started, while I see if I can't glom us a rabbit or two for supper. Now mind you, Happy, you be nice and friendly to this jasper, and don't let on we've got any doubts of him—"

Weary swung off at the corral, turned Glory inside and, taking his rifle from its case on the saddle, walked back to the open glade where he had seen the rabbits.

Grumbling to himself, Happy Jack pulled the saddle from his gray and limped up the dim trail to the cabin, hurrying a little in spite of his blisters. He wanted to see how the pore sick feller was making out.

The poor sick fellow was making out very well—from his own point of view. He was standing against the wall, close beside the door, with an old rifle barrel gripped in both hands. He waited a full two minutes longer than he had expected to, because Happy Jack had stopped by the woodpile and gleaned an armful of dry wood so he would not have to make an extra trip after it with those blistered heels of his.

One arm loaded with the wood, with the other hand he fumbled the crude latch, opened the door, and stepped inside. Instantly he forgot all about his blisters and everything else.

Down beyond the corral Weary's rifle barked. Half a minute later there came a second shot, but Happy Jack did not hear either of them. There followed an interval when the echoes had ceased to play with the sound and the wild hills were silent. Then Weary came whistling up to the cabin, dangling two skinned and cleaned rabbits in one hand, his rifle tucked carelessly under his arm.

Feeling as he did about the stranger he should have been more careful in his approach. But then Happy Jack was inside, probably doctoring his blisters before he started a fire. It would be just like him, Weary thought, when he saw that there was no smoke.

So he, too, lifted the clumsy latch, pushed open the door and stepped over the threshold. His whistle ended abruptly on a high note. But Happy Jack did not hear that, either.

Happy Jack opened his eyes to lamp-light. He smelled rabbit frying, and called to Weary.

It was the stranger who answered. His tone was arrogant, sneeringly exultant. "Your pardner's dead to the world. God, but you're tough! Way I come down on yuh, your head must be solid bone or you'd a croaked."

Happy Jack was silent a minute, testing the tightness of his bonds. He was on his own bunk. His aching feet were bound together at the ankles, his hands were tied behind his back, and his head felt all lopsided with a terrible buzzing ache centered where hammers seemed to be pounding.

"Aw, what yuh wanta do this fer?" he remonstrated in his complaining voice. "We was good t' you. We set up all night with yuh. Whatcha do t' Weary? If you've went an' hurt him—"

"He'll come alive, give him time enough. Damn it, I'd oughta work yuh over again with that gun barrel for leaving the woodbox about empty. Ain't enough here to fry them rabbits your pardner was so kind as to bring me." Their captor gave an unpleasant kind of chuckle. "Don't get excited. I won't be gone long. Be right back."

By turning his head Happy Jack could see the door open. It closed with a bang.

In Weary's bunk sounded a faint movement. "Happy! How yuh fixed?"

Happy Jack gave a groan partly born of relief. "Aw, I'm tied s' tight I can't wiggle a finger hardly. Yuh hurt, Weary?"

"Some. I've been laying here trying to scheme some way—"

"Aw, he's got us dead t' rights. We're done fer, Weary. He aims t' kill us. I knowed somep'm like this would happen."

"Dry up. I think I know what the idea is. He figures on beating it with our outfit." He stopped, listened to the sound of chopping. "You let me handle this, Happy."

"Aw," groaned Happy Jack. "We're goners, I tell yuh."

"Not by a damn sight. You let me—"

The opening of a door silenced him, but it was evident that the man had heard voices. He threw down his load of wood, filled the stove, and came over and stood looking down at them, feet well apart, hands on hips. He was grinning.

Weary stared up at him. "Well, I guess you turned the trick, all right. Fooled us plenty. I expect it's the outfit you're after, ain't it?"

"Well, I got it. Two nice rabbits throwed in." He moved back to the stove, turned the meat over in the frying

pan. "I kinda hate to do this, boys," he grinned, speaking above the sizzle of frying meat. "But you know how it is. A man can't get along without horses and grub."

"That's right," Weary agreed. "Especially when you're on the dodge and a sheriff's posse's working down this way."

The man left the stove and came over to them again. "Say, who told you so damn much? I kinda thought I'd better bump yuh both off before I go. Now I *know* it."

"And that would be a fool thing to do," Weary retorted. "With the sheriff liable to show up here any minute almost—"

"Oh, I'll fix it so's it'll pass as a cabin fight between you two. They couldn't pin it on me," the fellow assured him maliciously.

"Aw, gwan!" gulped Happy. "You wouldn't have the heart—"

Weary's laugh overrode Happy's voice. "That might hang together among your kind of folks, but it sure wouldn't go down with the sheriff or anybody else in this part of the country. The Flying U wouldn't swallow that for a holy minute. And how about our outfit being gone? We ain't Injuns. We don't take horses and grub and blankets to the Happy Hunting Ground when we go, do we?"

Caught, the outlaw grinned. "Have it your way. I was just kidding, anyway. Like you was, makin' out the sheriff's headed down this way. Say—" He checked himself, hurried over to his cooking. In a few minutes he was back, a rabbit haunch in one hand, a hunk of cold biscuit in the other. "Is that straight goods, about the sheriff?"

Weary slanted a look up at him. His voice was carefully confident. "Didn't

you know they'd struck your trail? I thought that was why you made for this old hangout of yours when you lost your horse. Why else would you hide up between the roofs, and never show yourself to us?"

The man eyed him suspiciously. "You're just jumpin' at conclusions. I lost my horse, sure. Gun, too. Flew outa my holster when I took that flip-flop. Rifle was tied on the saddle. Went over the cliff with the horse. And I knew there'd oughta be some grub left here. Darn little, though. Guess the boys ain't kept up the place since the Flyin' U took over the camp." He chewed a large mouthful of rabbit, swallowed. "Say, where'd you see the sheriff? You've been here two, three days. Where's that sheriff? You'd better talk straight now."

"Mamma!" sighed Weary. "Do I look as if I'm in a position to lie about it?"

"You sure ain't."

"Well—you know Dog Creek?"

"Sure, I know."

"There was a posse camped there as we came by. They were going to work down this way, going over the country with a fine tooth comb. They've got two of your bunch, I s'pose you know—"

"Which ones? We scattered—"

"Sure—we know that. They got Johnny Bright and Gunderson. They know you headed this way—"

If the outlaw had not been so intent upon Weary's words, he would have known it was all a lie from the wild look in Happy Jack's eyes as he lay there listening to Weary, but Happy Jack did not interrupt, for once.

"Hell!" The man cast the leg bone from him and drew his fingers up the side of his pants to clear them of grease. "I'll be drifting. Thanks for the tip,

cowboy. Hope you got good cayuses. I'll be hard to catch, you tell the sheriff."

Happy Jack lay perfectly still, rolling his eyes to follow the movements of the outlaw. Weary stared up at the roof, scowling. His lips were pale but a half smile lurked at their corners.

The outlaw finished packing all the food in the place. He was ready now for bedding, and he rolled the two men like logs upon their bunks, pulling blankets from under them with vicious jerks. Swiftly as any cowpuncher on the range could do it, he folded and stacked what he wanted, carrying his plunder outside.

He came over to them once more, eyeing them thoughtfully. "Which is the best horse you've got, you two? Don't lie to me, now."

"Aw—"

"Why, Happy's old Pete horse is the fastest and best," Weary spoke up promptly. "He's the gray. He—"

"That ain't the way I've heard yuh talk. What about that horse Glory?"

"You better not tackle him, Mister. He's no good. Liable to get yuh in a jam when you least expect it. Pete's the horse you better ride." Weary spoke earnestly, almost as if he were really anxious for the outlaw's welfare. "The gray, don't forget. That sorrel's poison."

"Mm—hmn," commented the outlaw sneeringly. "Kinda changed yer tune, ain't yuh? Pete's the gray, hunh? Well—"

"Aw, you leave old Pete be!" Happy Jack implored thickly.

"Shut up, you! What'd you care? You ain't going to need no horses, feller."

"Aw, watcha goin' to do?" wailed Happy.

The other regarded him coldly. "What I oughta do is feed yuh a bullet apiece."

"And hang for it?" Weary reminded him promptly. "Right now you've only got a few years for bank robbery chalked up against yuh. Looks to me—"

"Never mind how it looks to you. I ain't a fool. And I owe yuh a little something for staking me to a dandy outfit. So—" he hesitated, grinning malevolently at Happy Jack. "I ain't going to do that."

"Aw, whatcha goin' t' do t' us?" Happy repeated fearfully.

"Not a—damn'—thing. Just leave you here for the posse to turn loose when they come."

Words stuck in Happy Jack's throat. He gurgled, looked across at Weary, saw the shine of Weary's eyeballs, caught the warning shake of his head. Happy Jack groaned.

"You won't need the lantern—ner the lamp either." The outlaw spoke from the doorway. "If the posse don't come before morning, I'm safe as hell. Thanks for them rabbits, old socks. Pleasant dreams. Try and behave yourselves."

The room was plunged into darkness made odorous by the rancid smell of the blown-out lamp wick. The door slammed. In the silence they could hear his footsteps going down the path to the stable walking heavily because he was carrying a load. The sound grew fainter, ceased altogether.

Happy Jack's voice rose suddenly in angry recrimination. "Aw, now lookit what you've done lyin' about things!"

Weary drew an audible breath. "Saved our lives, is all. What you kicking about?"

"Aw, gwan. I'd rather be shot an' have it over with. That there lie about

the shurf—an' there ain't no shurf within a hundred mile uh here!"

"Somebody'll come, maybe. We're alive, Happy. That's something."

"Aw, it ain't nothin' t' me," snarled Happy. "Not a gosh-dern thing! Somebuddy'll come—in a coupla months, mebbby. It's that there jinx a-workin'. I knowed somep'm awful was goin' t' happen, Weary. Them rattles—I kep' tellin' yuh so, didn't I? An' you laughed about it! Jest *laughed*. Y'ain't laughin' now, I betcha. We gotta lay here an'—rot—"

Happy caught his breath as the horrible truth pressed in upon him. His voice came out of the dark like a terrified child. "Weary! Aw, can't yuh *do* somep'm?"

"I might, if I could see. Buck up, Happy. Try and get some sleep. Soon as it comes daybreak I'll locate a knife, maybe."

"Aw, he went an' took every knife they was. I seen 'im. I was watchin'. He never left a thing that'd be any good t' us, Weary. Took our guns an' everything?"

"Mamma!" sighed Weary. "He sure is a thorough cuss. Well, we'll try something else, then—" His voice trailed off as his thoughts drew inward, seeking desperately for some way of escape.

That the full responsibility of their plight rested upon his shoulders he took for granted. It was his own fault. No one ever expected anything of Happy Jack. When their bodies were found, as they would be when they failed to show up at the appointed time for the roundup, every man in the outfit would wonder what Weary was thinking of to let the two of them be trapped like this. Happy would be mourned as a big-

hearted numbskull whom anyone could fool. They would find it hard to believe, however, that Weary Davidson was caught napping. They'd think a gang of three or four had descended upon the cabin. They'd never believe this atrocity had been committed by just one man.

There must be some way out. There had to be. It wasn't in the cards that he and Happy Jack must lie there waiting for a miserable death. Someone must come; one of the boys might ride down with some message.

But Weary could not think of any possible message the Old Man would need to send. They had their orders: gather up what cattle had drifted into this particular section, and drive them out to meet the roundup on a certain creek at a certain time. Simple. Until they were several days overdue no one would be really worried about them. No, the chance of rescue was too remote to consider. Furthermore, Weary hated like poison the thought of being found like this. Dead or alive, it would be a humiliating thing. Intolerable. He'd have to think of something.

"Happy!"

"Hunh?"

"How're you laying?"

"Purty gosh-dern uncomf'table. My hands is all swole up a' ready. I been tryin' t' work loose, but all I done is t' work the hide off'm m' wrists."

"Take it easy. No use in that—not if he tied you the way he did me. Are you on your side? If not, turn over facing the front. And leave room on the edge for me."

"Aw, whatcha goin' t' do, Weary?"

Weary gave a heartening little chuckle. "I'm going to put you to work. I always wondered what them buck

teeth of yours was good for. Now I know."

"Aw gwan. This ain't no time t' be joshin'."

"I'm not. Plumb in earnest, Happy. I'm going to hitch over there and let you gnaw on this rope for a while. If you can't untie this knot with your teeth, by thunder, you *oughta* die."

Happy Jack swore a hopeful oath. Then his natural pessimism and his pet jinx took hold of him. "Aw, I betcha that ain't a-goin' t' work," he declared dolefully. "This here's our finish. I c'n feel it comin'."

Weary hitched along on the bunk edge. He wagged his fingers investigatively; got hold of Happy Jack's too prominent nose and tweaked it with a facetiousness he could not feel in his heart. But it served its purpose. It brought a resentful squawk from Happy. Weary laughed.

"Got yuh located, hunh? All right, get busy. Be better if we had a light on the subject, but you can go by the feel, I guess. Work that knot loose with your teeth."

"Aw, I can't do it, Weary. It ain't goin' t' work. I tell yuh. Gnawin' ropes is outa my line."

"How about laying here till you starve to death then?" There was no bantering tone in Weary's voice now. "Hell, you can try, can't you? I've got two fillings in front or I'd tackle it myself. Take it easy now. We've got all the time there is." His tone was bitter. "Just feel with your lips till you find the right twist, and fly at it. And remember this, Happy; we're both elected to lay here and rot if you don't make it."

So Happy went to work, awkwardly desperate, setting his teeth on Weary's wrists as often as not, wasting much

effort because of the darkness and his own hampering bonds.

After what seemed hours—"Aw. I've wore my teeth clear back to the gums," Happy complained while he stopped to rest a minute. "I'm spittin' blood!"

"Yes, and it's my blood, you damned hyena," gritted Weary. "One more round and you'll have my top wrist gnawed plumb off." He grunted. "Well, get busy. If you've got to fill up on me like a mosquito, hurry up for the Lordsake, so you can get to work on that damn rope!"

So Happy went doggedly to work again, and Weary clamped his teeth together and endured the miss licks in almost complete silence. By midnight they were both free. With the lighted lamp they foraged for food, found none, and went to bed with empty stomachs. But even Happy Jack had no complaint to make about that, nor about the depleted bed robbed of two prized blankets.

Habit and hunger together woke them at dawn, and now their freedom, while still a matter to be grateful for, could not hold their entire attention. They had to think of the predicament they were in. Twenty miles from the nearest help, and no guns, grub, or horses.

"Well," yawned Weary, "looks like shanks' mare has gotta be rode on an empty stomach, today. We could kill a calf."

"I betcha I got blood poisonin' in them blisters," growled Happy, ignoring Weary's suggestion. "I wisht you'd take a look. All that there tyin' up didn't do 'em no good. Stopped the blood workin'. They hurt somep'm awful." His groans certainly bore out his statement.

"Mamma, but you're an unfortunate cuss," sighed Weary. "I can't see as it was much use to untie yuh, Happy. Outa one trouble, into another." He inspected Happy Jack's heels over the cigarette he was rolling. "You might wash 'em and see what happens," he suggested heartlessly.

Whereupon Happy Jack pulled in his feet with an oath and flopped over with his face to the wall. "Aw, yuh jest ain't got no heart," he grumbled. "I'm sick, I tell yuh. I can't walk outa here, the shape my feet's in, an' yuh know it. Gwan an' kill a calf, why don'tcha, if you kin find anything to kill one with."

Weary stood up, pulling on his coat, for the dawn wind was cold. Happy Jack's tousled red hair, just visible above the blanket offended him mightily. He gave it a vicious yank.

"No gun, no rope, nothing but an ax—maybe, if he didn't glom that too. And a pocket knife. How'n hell am I going to catch a calf and kill it without help?"

"Aw, I ain't able t' walk," Happy Jack whined, burrowing deeper. "Lemme alone, can'tcha?"

Weary gave a snort of disgust and moved to the door. "All right, lay there till I get back—if I come at all. I'm going to walk outa here, and I'm going right now. You can lay there and cry over your blisters till your belly's glued to your backbone—and then, damn yuh, maybe you'll be ready to walk even if your feet do hurt!" He went out, slamming the door behind him.

"Aw—Weary! Where yuh goin', Weary?" Happy Jack was out of his blankets, clawing for his clothes. Pulling on his boots was an agonizing ordeal that brought tears to his eyes, for

a slight infection had attacked the rubbed blisters and his heels were noticeably inflamed and swollen. But Weary had gone and left him there alone. He might not come back—he had said so. The stark terror in that thought overbore his pain.

He hobbled to the door, tore it open, and rushed out as if devils were behind him.

"Weary! Aw, wait a minute, can'tcha? I'm a-comin'!" He stopped short, staring open-mouthed.

Weary was coming up the path, his shoulders bowed beneath the weight of a full kyack. From under his tilted hat brim he looked at Happy.

"Get back in there and start a fire," he called with cheerful assurance. "We'll eat before we hit for the ranch—and when we go, we'll ride!"

"Aw-w—g-gwan!" stuttered Happy Jack. "Uh—didn't the feller take the stuff?"

Weary pushed past him into the cabin, let down his load with a grunt of relief. He pushed back his hat, drew a hand across his forehead, slapped it down hard on Happy's shoulder.

"Lady Luck's got both arms around us, Happy. He—"

"H-How'd he come t' leave all that grub?" Happy Jack's slow brain could not grasp it.

"He—didn't go," Weary said in an odd tone. "He got smart. He thought he knew it all. When I lied about the sheriff he swallowed the bait whole. And when I told him the truth about Glory he thought I was lying. The damn fool—he tried to ride that yella bolt uh lightning."

"Hunh?" Happy Jack gulped. "He hurt bad, Weary?"

"No-o," drawled Weary. "He ain't hurt. He's layin' down there with the

whole top of his head caved in, where Glory throwed him against a corral post—head on."

"Aw—gwan!" croaked Happy.

"We'll eat," said Weary cheerfully, "and then we'll load him on Mixer and pack him in where the sheriff can look him over. Yuh know, Happy, the bank put up a bounty on them robbers. A thousand simoleons a pelt." He grinned with a twinkle in his eyes. "By rights that oughta belong to me."

"Aw gwan. It ain't yourn any more'n what it's mine!"

"Well, it's my bronc that nailed him, remember."

"Aw—w—"

"Same as them rattles. They're mine too, by rights."

"Aw—take the gosh-dern things." Happy Jack clawed in his pocket, flung the rattles toward Weary. "Them things is a jinx—Jest the same, half that bounty b'longs t' me. Them was

my apricot pies he got sick on, yuh notice. Only fer them pies he'd a killed us in the night. He'd a got plumb away before—"

"Mamma, but you're a circumstantial cuss, Happy. All right—you win. So how about this thirteen jinx, hunh? Maybe you'll admit now—"

"Aw, I didn't admit a gosh-dern thing. That there button don't count."

Weary was counting, however. He counted twice, started to say something, then counted again.

"Mamma!" he exclaimed in a tone of astonishment. "Happy, I oughta brain you for this. You know what you did? Laid a jinx on yourself with fourteen rattles—not counting the button. You damn crow-counting chump, look what you let us in for. Like to of got us killed with your damn fake jinx!"

"Aw—gwan!" gulped Happy Jack, and gave Weary a sickly grin.

**Answers to
"Lone Star Lingo" Quiz
on page 128**

1. Fresh bed sheets.
2. Bullet.
3. Oyster.
4. Go.
5. English saddle.
6. Personal belongings.
7. Strange gadget.
8. Chinese cook.
9. Traveling-bag.
10. Device used in horse-breaking.



"Stop reading my mail!"



Free - for - All

A READING of the Zane Grey novel, "The Man of the Forest," clearly shows why it topped the *Bookman's* annual list the year it was first published in book form. Its hero is a solitary man whose religion is nature; to him God is imminent in all of the great outdoors. The tribulations and petty cares of so-called civilization are not for him. How deeply most of us feel, at one time or another, that all would be well if only we could emulate him! And how woefully short most of us would fall from realizing the fullness of such a theoretically ideal existence if we tried his mode of life—how we would miss our bathtubs and our dinner parties and our central heating!

★

"Solitude Basin," by John E. Kelly, brings back that staunch if not sterling

character, "Bull Jim" Marsh, who be-deviled another young engineer in an earlier tale, "Bridger Gorge." Not that we questioned the slick business with the rails which confounds Bull Jim and his employer finally, but Author Kelly assures us that in his opinion as an engineer the expedient Kimbrough devises is physically feasible. Nowadays it would be illegal, but "in the old days of the slambang railroad wars almost anything went," says Mr. Kelly. More Kellyarns coming!

★

Mark Lish's slick short-short, "Slicker Than Water," smacks somewhat of O. Henry. You'll know what we mean when you read the story, if you haven't already.

B. M. Bower again! Her novelette, "Thirteen Rattles and a Button," is a narrative of the Flying U's Happy Family, which is enough said, for most Western fans, at least. If a more likeable cowhand crew than that has ever been put down on paper, we've been missing something!

★

"Justice by the Ounce" corrals some amusing episodes concerning a peculiar breed in Old West history. The American "alcaldes" of the early California days flew high for a brief period; fortunately, more conventional courts of justice put an end to their often fantastic brand of law wrangling. "Dan

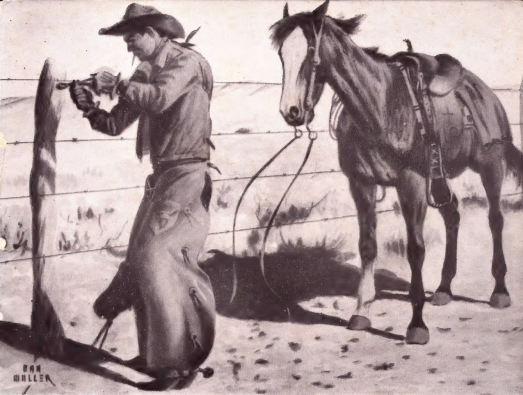
Duane" is a pen name which conceals the identity of an old hand at the writing game.

★

John Chisum, hero (?) of W. H. Hutchinson's "Old Jinglebob and the Legal Rustle," was responsible for many a colorful page in the story of the Southwest. Hutch warns that Chisum should not be confused with Jesse Chisholm, the half-breed who gave his name to the Chisholm Trail. Both surnames stem from the Scottish clan of Chisholm, and the two men often get mixed up in people's minds, the more so since many writers have rendered the Jinglebob name as "Chisholm" too.

—THE EDITORS.





JACK OF ALL TRADES

AMIGOS, here is a cowhand doing a chore that every good range rider does—and he does it without being told. Most cowpokes carry a pair of pliers with them at all times. While riding fence or on other chores he may run across a loose strand of wire and he will immediately take up the slack; sometimes a small stick, used all same like a tourniquet, will do. The better the condition of the fence, the fewer the strays among the stock. Cows have a habit of rubbing against the barbwire—maybe it's ticks, maybe just an itch. Their weight makes the strands sag where they rub against it, sometimes maybe creating an opening big enough for them to get their head and a leg through—the rest follows easy enough.

Along other lines, the cowhand may find he has to climb to the top of the windmill when it goes haywire. He has to repair the roundup wagons, mend harness, shoe hosses—or even act as dress model when the ranch foreman's wife wants to pin up a new creation she's throwed together. It's all in the day's—and night's—work . . . no life for a finicky gent!

DAN MULLER

In This Issue

THE MAN OF THE FOREST by Zane Grey (abridgment)

An absorbing novel of a solitude-loving woodland giant, Milt Dale, who whilst lying in the loft of an abandoned cabin, overhears a plot that spells danger to beautiful Helen Rayner, heiress of old Al Auchincloss, leading citizen of Pine, who is slowly losing his grip on life, and reluctantly plunges him headlong into a thrilling sequence of adventure and peril. Dale, who has fallen in love with Helen, abandons his sylvan solitude to help her as the unscrupulous Beasley, a former protege of Auchincloss, puts his ruthless plan into action—the rest is action as only Zane Grey can write it.

THIRTEEN RATTLES AND A BUTTON by B. M. Bower

Another exciting novelette of the "Flying U's" happy family. Happy Jack and Weary discover just how important the number of rattles on a dead snake's tail can be.

SOLITUDE BASIN by John E. Kelly

"Bull Jim" Marsh, Divisional Super for the Pacific Eastern, does his best—or worst—to keep the new line out of Solitude Basin, but Dan Kimbrough, construction engineer, has a trick up his sleeve to match each one of Bull Jim's.

SLICKER THAN WATER by Mark Lish

The street, long and dusty—the bank, easy prey—the getaway trail, short and tragic. A grim tale of an outlaw gang's gory debacle.

—and many other carefully selected stories and features of the colourful West.

No. 2

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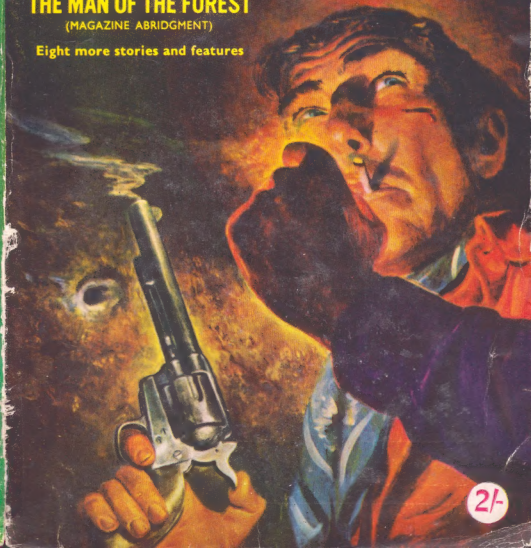
ZANE GREY'S **WESTERN**

MAGAZINE

A Zane Grey Novel

THE MAN OF THE FOREST (MAGAZINE ABRIDGMENT)

Eight more stories and features



ZANE GREY'S WESTERN MAGAZINE

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